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The Moment of Decision — STANLEY ELLIN

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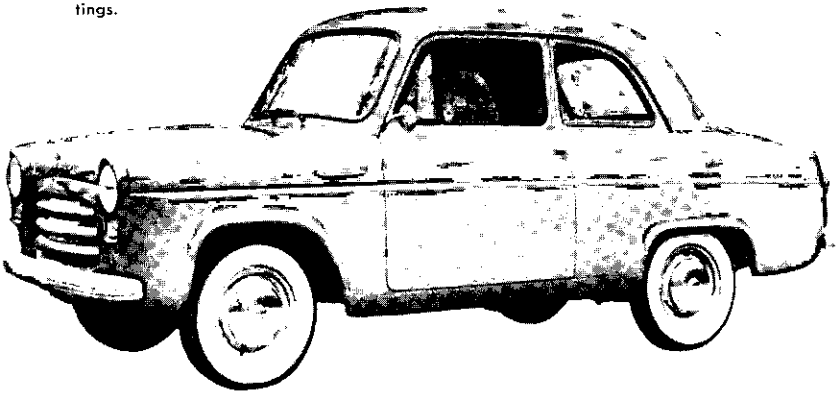

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THE MOMENT OF DECISION

by STANLEY ELLIN

HUGH LOZIER WAS THE EXCEPTION to the rule that people who are completely sure of themselves cannot be likeable. We have all met the sure ones, of course — those controlled but penetrating voices which cut through all others in a discussion, those hard forefingers jabbing home opinions on your chest, those living Final Words on all issues — and I imagine we all share the same amalgam of dislike and envy for them. Dislike, because no one likes to be shouted down or prodded in the chest, and envy, because everyone wishes he himself were so rich in self-assurance that he could do the shouting down and the prodding.

For myself, since my work took me regularly to certain places in this atomic world where the only state was confusion and the only steady employment that of splitting political hairs, I found absolute judgments harder and harder to come by. Hugh once observed of this that it was a good thing my superiors in the Department were not cut of the same cloth, because God knows what would happen to the country then. I didn't relish that, but — and there was my curse again — I had to grant him his right to say it.

Despite this, and despite the fact that Hugh was my brother-in-law — a curious relationship when you come to think of it — I liked him immensely, just as everyone else did who knew him. He was a big, good-looking man, with clear blue eyes in a ruddy face, and with a quick, outgoing nature eager to appreciate whatever you had to offer. He was overwhelmingly generous, and his generosity was of that rare and excellent kind which makes you feel as if you are doing the donor a favor by accepting it.

I wouldn't say he had any great sense of humor, but plain good-humor can sometimes be an adequate substitute for that, and in Hugh's

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case it was. His stormy side was largely reserved for those times when he thought you might have needed his help in something, and failed to call on him for it. Which meant that ten minutes after Hugh had met you and liked you, you were expected to ask him for anything he might be able to offer. A month or so after he married my sister Elizabeth she mentioned to him my avid interest in a fine Copley he had hanging in his gallery at Hilltop, and I can still vividly recall my horror when it suddenly arrived, heavily crated and with his gift card attached, at my barren room-and-a-half. It took considerable effort, but I finally managed to return it to him by foregoing the argument that the picture was undoubtedly worth more than the entire building in which I lived and by complaining that it simply didn't show to advantage on my wall. I think he suspected I was lying, but being Hugh he would never dream of charging me with that in so many words.

Of course, Hilltop and the two hundred years of Lozier tradition that went into it did much to shape Hugh this way. The first Loziers had carved the estate from the heights overlooking the river, had worked hard and flourished exceedingly; in successive generations had invested their income so wisely that money and position eventually erected a towering wall between Hilltop and the world outside. Truth to tell, Hugh was very much a man of the Eighteenth Century who somehow found himself in the Twentieth, and simply made the best of it.

Hilltop itself was almost a replica of the celebrated, but long untenanted, Dane house nearby, and was striking enough to open anybody's eyes at a glance. The house was weathered stone, graceful despite its bulk, and the vast lawns reaching to the river's edge were tended with such fanatic devotion over the years that they had become carpets of purest green which magically changed lustre under any breeze. Gardens ranged from the other side of the house down to the groves which half hid the stables and out buildings, and past the far side of the grooves ran the narrow road which led to town. The road was a courtesy road, each estate holder along it maintaining his share, and I think it safe to say that for all the crushed rock he laid in it Hugh made less use of it by far than any of his neighbors.

Hugh's life was bound up in Hilltop; he could be made to leave it only by dire necessity; and if you did meet him away from it you were made acutely aware that he was counting off the minutes until he could return. And if you weren't wary you would more than likely find yourself going along with him when he did return, and totally unable to tear yourself away from the place while the precious weeks rolled by. I know. I believe I spent more time at Hilltop than at my own apart-

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ment after my sister brought Hugh into the family.

At one time I wondered how Elizabeth took to this marriage, considering that before she met Hugh she had been as restless and flighty as she was pretty. When I put the question to her directly, she said, "It's wonderful, darling. Just as wonderful as I knew it would be when I first met him."

It turned out that their first meeting had taken place at an art exhibition, a showing of some ultra-modern stuff, and she had been intently studying one of the more bewildering concoctions on display when she became aware of this tall, good-looking man staring at her. And, as she put it, she had been about to set him properly in his place when he said abruptly, "Are you admiring that?"

This was so unlike what she had expected that she was taken completely aback. "I don't know," she said weakly. "Am I supposed to?"

"No," said the stranger, "it's damned nonsense. Come along now, and I'll show you something which isn't a waste of time."

"And," Elizabeth said to me, "I came along like a pup at his heels, while he marched up and down and told me what was good and what was bad, and in a good loud voice, too, so that we collected quite a crowd along the way. Can you picture it, darling?"

"Yes," I said, "I can." By now I had shared similar occasions with Hugh, and learned at first hand that nothing could dent his cast-iron assurance.

"Well," Elizabeth went on, "I must admit that at first I was a little put off, but then I began to see that he knew exactly what he was talking about, and that he was terribly sincere. Not a bit self-conscious about anything, but just eager for me to understand things the way he did. It's the same way with everything. Everybody else in the world is always fumbling and bumbling over deciding anything — what to order for dinner, or how to manage his job, or whom to vote for — but Hugh always *knows*. It's *not* knowing that makes for all those nerves and complexes and things you hear about, isn't that so? Well, I'll take Hugh, thank you, and leave everyone else to the psychiatrists."

So there it was. An Eden with flawless lawns and no awful nerves and complexes, and not even the glimmer of a serpent in the offing. That is, not a glimmer until the day Raymond made his entrance on the scene.

We were out on the terrace that day, Hugh and Elizabeth and I, slowly being melted into a sort of liquid torpor by the August sunshine, and all of us too far gone to make even a pretense at talk. I lay there with a linen cap over my face, listening to the summer noises around me and being perfectly happy.

There was the low, steady hiss of the breeze through the aspens nearby, the plash and drip of oars on the

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river below, and now and then the melancholy *tink-tunk* of a sheep bell from one of the flock on the lawn. The flock was a fancy of Hugh's. He swore that nothing was better for a lawn than a few sheep grazing on it, and every summer five or six fat and sleepy ewes were turned out on the grass to serve this purpose and to add a pleasantly pastoral note to the view.

My first warning of something amiss came from the sheep — from the sudden sound of their bells clanging wildly and then a baa-ing which suggested an assault by a whole pack of wolves. I heard Hugh say, "Damn!" loudly and angrily, and I opened my eyes to see something more incongruous than wolves. It was a large black poodle in the full glory of a clownish haircut, a bright red collar, and an ecstasy of high spirits as he chased the frightened sheep around the lawn. It was clear the poodle had no intention of hurting them — he probably found them the most wonderful playmates imaginable — but it was just as clear that the panicky ewes didn't understand this, and would very likely end up in the river before the fun was over.

In the bare second it took me to see all this, Hugh had already leaped the low terrace wall and was among the sheep, herding them away from the water's edge, and shouting commands at the dog who had different ideas.

"Down, boy!" he yelled. "Down!" And then as he would to one of his own hounds, he sternly commanded, "Heel!"

He would have done better, I thought, to have picked up a stick or stone and made a threatening gesture, since the poodle paid no attention whatever to Hugh's words. Instead, continuing to bark happily, the poodle made for the sheep again, this time with Hugh in futile pursuit. An instant later the dog was frozen into immobility by a voice from among the aspens near the edge of the lawn.

"*Asseyez!*" the voice called breathlessly. "*Asseyez-vous!*"

Then the man appeared, a small, dapper figure trotting across the grass. Hugh stood waiting, his face darkening as we watched.

Elizabeth squeezed my arm. "Let's get down there," she whispered. "Hugh doesn't like being made a fool of."

We got there in time to hear Hugh open his big guns. "Any man," he was saying, "who doesn't know how to train an animal to its place shouldn't own one."

The man's face was all polite attention. It was a good face, thin and intelligent, and webbed with tiny lines at the corners of the eyes. There was also something behind those eyes that couldn't quite be masked. A gentle mockery. A glint of wry perception turned on the world like a camera lens. It was nothing anyone like Hugh would have noticed, but it was there all the same, and I found myself warming

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to it on the spot. There was also something tantalizingly familiar about the newcomer's face, his high forehead, and his thinning gray hair, but much as I dug into my memory during Hugh's long and solemn lecture I couldn't come up with an answer. The lecture ended with a few remarks on the best methods of dog training, and by then it was clear that Hugh was working himself into a mood of forgiveness.

"As long as there's no harm done," he said —

The man nodded soberly. "Still, to get off on the wrong foot with one's new neighbors —"

Hugh looked startled. "Neighbors?" he said almost rudely. "You mean that you live around here?"

The man waved toward the aspens. "On the other side of those woods."

"The *Dane* house?" The Dane house was almost as sacred to Hugh as Hilltop, and he had once explained to me that if he were ever offered a chance to buy the place he would snap it up. His tone now was not so much wounded as incredulous. "I don't believe it!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes," the man assured him, "the Dane house. I performed there at a party many years ago, and always hoped that some day I might own it."

It was the word performed which gave me my clue — that and the accent barely perceptible under the precise English. He had been born and raised in Marseilles — that would explain the accent — and long before my time he had already become a legend.

"You're Raymond, aren't you?" I said. "Charles Raymond."

"I prefer Raymond alone." He smiled in deprecation of his own small vanity. "And I am flattered that you recognize me."

I don't believe he really was. Raymond the Magician, Raymond the Great, would, if anything, expect to be recognized wherever he went. As the master of sleight of hand who had paled Thurston's star, as the escape artist who had almost outshone Houdini, Raymond would not be inclined to underestimate himself.

He had started with the standard box of tricks which makes up the repertoire of most professional magicians; he had gone far beyond that to those feats of escape which, I suppose, are known to us all by now. The lead casket sealed under a foot of lake ice, the welded-steel strait jackets, the vaults of the Bank of England, the exquisite suicide knot which noosed throat and doubled legs together so that the motion of a leg draws the noose tighter around the throat — all these Raymond had known and escaped from. And then at the pinnacle of fame he had dropped from sight and his name had become relegated to the past.

When I asked him why, he shrugged.

"A man works for money or for the love of his work. If he has all the wealth he needs and has no more love for his work, why go on?"

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"But to give up a great career —" I protested.

"It was enough to know that the house was waiting here."

"You mean," Elizabeth said, "that you never intended to live any place but here?"

"Never — not once in all these years." He laid a finger along his nose and winked broadly at us. "Of course, I made no secret of this to the Dane estate, and when the time came to sell I was the first and only one approached."

"You don't give up an idea easily," Hugh said in an edged voice.

Raymond laughed. "Idea? It became an obsession really. Over the years I traveled to many parts of the world, but no matter how fine the place, I knew it could not be as fine as that house on the edge of the woods there, with the river at its feet and the hills beyond. Some day, I would tell myself, when my travels are done I will come here, and, like Candide, cultivate my garden."

He ran his hand abstractedly over the poodle's head and looked around with an air of great satisfaction. "And now," he said, "here I am."

Here he was, indeed, and it quickly became clear that his arrival was working a change on Hilltop. Or, since Hilltop was so completely a reflection of Hugh, it was clear that a change was being worked on Hugh. He became irritable and restless, and more aggressively sure of himself than ever. The warmth and good nature were still there — they were as much part of him as his arrogance — but he now had to work a little harder at them. He reminded me of a man who is bothered by a speck in the eye, but can't find it, and must get along with it as best he can.

Raymond, of course, was the speck, and I got the impression at times that he rather enjoyed the role. It would have been easy enough for him to stay close to his own house and cultivate his garden, or paste up his album, or whatever retired performers do, but he evidently found that impossible. He had a way of drifting over to Hilltop at odd times, just as Hugh was led to find his way to the Dane house and spend long and troublesome sessions there.

Both of them must have known that they were so badly suited to each other that the easy and logical solution would have been to stay apart. But they had the affinity of negative and positive forces, and when they were in a room together the crackling of the antagonistic current between them was so strong you could almost see it in the air.

Any subject became a point of contention for them, and they would duel over it bitterly: Hugh armored and weaponed with his massive assurance, Raymond flicking away with a rapier, trying to find a chink in the armor. I think that what annoyed Raymond most was the discovery that there was no chink in the armor. As someone with an obvious passion for searching out all sides to all

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questions, and for going deep into motives and causes, he was continually being outraged by Hugh's single-minded way of laying down the law.

He didn't hesitate to let Hugh know that. "You are positively medieval." he said. "And of all things men should have learned since that time, the biggest is that there are no easy answers, no solutions one can give with a snap of the fingers. I can only hope for you that some day you may be faced with the perfect dilemma, the unanswerable question. You would find that a revelation. You would learn more in that minute than you dreamed possible."

And Hugh did not make matters any better when he coldly answered: "And *I* say, that for any man with a brain and the courage to use it there is no such thing as a perfect dilemma."

It may be that this was the sort of episode that led to the trouble that followed, or it may be that Raymond acted out of the most innocent and esthetic motives possible. But, whatever the motives, the results were inevitable and dangerous.

They grew from the project Raymond outlined for us in great detail one afternoon. Now that he was living in the Dane house he had discovered that it was too big, too overwhelming. "Like a museum," he explained. "I find myself wandering through it like a lost soul through endless galleries."

The grounds also needed landscaping. The ancient trees were handsome, but, as Raymond put it, there were just too many of them. "Literally," he said, "I cannot see the river for the trees, and I am one devoted to the sight of running water."

Altogether there would be drastic changes. Two wings of the house would come down, the trees would be cleared away to make a broad aisle to the water, the whole place would be enlivened. It would no longer be a museum, but the perfect home he had envisioned over the years.

At the start of this recitative Hugh was slouched comfortably in his chair. Then as Raymond drew the vivid picture of what was to be, Hugh sat up straighter and straighter until he was as rigid as a trooper in the saddle. His lips compressed. His face became blood-red. His hands clenched and unclenched in a slow, deadly rhythm. Only a miracle was restraining him from an open outburst, but it was not the kind of miracle to last. I saw from Elizabeth's expression that she understood this, too, but was as helpless as I to do anything about it. And when Raymond, after painting the last glowing strokes of his description, said complacently, "Well, now, what do you think?" there was no holding Hugh.

He leaned forward with deliberation and said, "Do you really want to know what I think?"

"Now, Hugh," Elizabeth said in alarm. "Please, Hugh —"

He brushed that aside.

"Do you really want to know?" he demanded of Raymond.

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Raymond frowned. "Of course."

"Then I'll tell you," Hugh said. He took a deep breath. "I think that nobody but a damned iconoclast could even conceive the atrocity you're proposing. I think you're one of those people who takes pleasure in smashing apart anything that's stamped with tradition or stability. You'd kick the props from under the whole world if you could!"

"I beg your pardon," Raymond said. He was very pale and angry. "But I think you are confusing change with destruction. Surely, you must comprehend that I do not intend to destroy anything, but only wish to make some necessary changes."

"Necessary?" Hugh gibed. "Rooting up a fine stand of trees that's been there for centuries? Ripping apart a house that's as solid as a rock? *I* call it wanton destruction."

"I'm afraid I do not understand. To refresh a scene, to reshape it —"

"I have no intention of arguing," Hugh cut in. "I'm telling you straight out that you don't have the right to tamper with that property!"

They were on their feet now, facing each other truculently, and the only thing that kept me from being really frightened was the conviction that Hugh would not become violent, and that Raymond was far too level-headed to lose his temper. Then the threatening moment was magically past. Raymond's lips suddenly quirked in amusement, and he studied Hugh with courteous interest.

"I see," he said. "I was quite stupid not to have understood at once. This property, which, I remarked, was a little too much like a museum, is to remain that way, and I am to be its custodian. A caretaker of the past, one might say, a curator of its relics."

He shook his head smilingly. "But I am afraid I am not quite suited to that role. I lift my hat to the past, it is true, but I prefer to court the present. For that reason I will go ahead with my plans, and hope they do not make an obstacle to our friendship."

I remember thinking, when I left next day for the city and a long, hot week at my desk, that Raymond had carried off the affair very nicely, and that, thank God, it had gone no further than it did. So I was completely unprepared for Elizabeth's call at the end of the week.

It was awful, she said. It was the business of Hugh and Raymond and the Dane house, but worse than ever. She was counting on my coming down to Hilltop the next day; there couldn't be any question about that. She had planned a way of clearing up the whole thing, but I simply had to be there to back her up. After all, I was one of the few people Hugh would listen to, and she was depending on me.

"Depending on me for what?" I said. I didn't like the sound of it. "And as for Hugh's listening to me, Elizabeth, isn't that stretching it a good deal? I can't see him wanting

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my advice on his personal affairs."

"If you're going to be touchy about it —"

"I'm *not* touchy about it," I retorted. "I just don't like getting mixed up in this thing. Hugh's quite capable of taking care of himself."

"Maybe too capable."

"And what does that mean?"

"Oh, I can't explain now," she wailed. "I'll tell you everything tomorrow. And, darling, if you have any brotherly feelings you'll be here on the morning train. Believe me, it's serious."

I arrived on the morning train in a bad state. My imagination is one of the over-active kind that can build a cosmic disaster out of very little material, and by the time I arrived at the house I was prepared for almost anything.

But, on the surface, at least, all was serene. Hugh greeted me warmly, Elizabeth was her cheerful self, and we had an amiable lunch and a long talk which never came near the subject of Raymond or the Dane house. I said nothing about Elizabeth's phone call, but thought of it with a steadily growing sense of outrage until I was alone with her.

"Now," I said, "I'd like an explanation of all this mystery. The Lord knows what I expected to find out here, but it certainly wasn't anything I've seen so far. And I'd like some accounting for the bad time you've given me since that call."

"All right," she said grimly, "and that's what you'll get. Come along."

She led the way on a long walk through the gardens and past the stables and outbuildings. Near the private road which lay beyond the last grove of trees she suddenly said, "When the car drove you up to the house didn't you notice anything strange about this road?"

"No, I didn't."

"I suppose not. The driveway to the house turns off too far away from here. But now you'll have a chance to see for yourself."

I did see for myself. A chair was set squarely in the middle of the road and on the chair sat a stout man placidly reading a magazine. I recognized the man at once: he was one of Hugh's stable hands, and he had the patient look of someone who has been sitting for a long time and expects to sit a good deal longer. It took me only a second to realize what he was there for, but Elizabeth wasn't leaving anything to my deductive powers. When we walked over to him, the man stood up and grinned at us.

"William," Elizabeth said, "would you mind telling my brother what instructions Mr. Lozier gave you?"

"Sure," the man said cheerfully. "Mr. Lozier told us there was always supposed to be one of us sitting right here, and any truck we saw that might be carrying construction stuff or suchlike for the Dane house was to be stopped and turned back. All we had to do is tell them it's private property and they were trespassing. If they laid a finger on us we just

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call in the police. That's the whole thing."

"Have you turned back any trucks?" Elizabeth asked for my benefit.

The man looked surprised. "Why, you know that, Mrs. Lozier," he said. "There was a couple of them the first day we were out here, and that was all. There wasn't any fuss either," he explained to me. "None of those drivers wants to monkey with trespass."

When we were away from the road again I clapped my hand to my forehead. "It's incredible!" I said. "Hugh must know he can't get away with this. That road is the only one to the Dane place, and it's been in public use so long that it isn't even a private thoroughfare any more!"

Elizabeth nodded. "And that's exactly what Raymond told Hugh a few days back. He came over here in a fury, and they had quite an argument about it. And when Raymond said something about hauling Hugh off to court, Hugh answered that he'd be glad to spend the rest of his life in litigation over this business. But that wasn't the worst of it. The last thing Raymond said was that Hugh ought to know that force only invites force, and ever since then I've been expecting a war to break out here any minute. Don't you see? That man blocking the road is a constant provocation, and it scares me."

I could understand that. And the more I considered the matter, the more dangerous it looked.

"But I have a plan," Elizabeth said eagerly, "and that's why I wanted you here. I'm having a dinner party tonight, a very small, informal dinner party. It's to be a sort of peace conference. You'll be there, and Dr. Wynant — Hugh likes you both a great deal — and," she hesitated, "Raymond."

"No!" I said. "You mean he's actually coming?"

"I went over to see him yesterday and we had a long talk. I explained everything to him — about neighbors being able to sit down and come to an understanding, and about brotherly love and — oh, it must have sounded dreadfully inspirational and sticky, but it worked. He said he would be there."

I had a foreboding. "Does Hugh know about this?"

"About the dinner? Yes."

"I mean, about Raymond's being there."

"No, he doesn't." And then when she saw me looking hard at her, she burst out defiantly with, "Well, *something* had to be done, and I did it, that's all! Isn't it better than just sitting and waiting for God knows what?"

Until we were all seated around the dining-room table that evening I might have conceded the point. Hugh had been visibly shocked by Raymond's arrival, but then, apart from a sidelong glance at Elizabeth which had volumes written in it, he managed to conceal his feelings well enough.

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He had made the introductions gracefully, kept up his end of the conversation, and, all in all, did a creditable job of playing host.

Ironically, it was the presence of Dr. Wynant which made even this much of a triumph possible for Elizabeth, and which then turned it into disaster. The doctor was an eminent surgeon, stocky and gray-haired, with an abrupt, positive way about him. Despite his own position in the world he seemed pleased as a schoolboy to meet Raymond, and in no time at all they were as thick as thieves.

It was when Hugh discovered during dinner that nearly all attention was fixed on Raymond and very little on himself that the mantle of good host started to slip, and the fatal flaws in Elizabeth's plan showed through. There are people who enjoy entertaining lions and who take pleasure in reflected glory, but Hugh was not one of them. Besides, he regarded the doctor as one of his closest friends, and I have noticed that it is the most assured of men who can be the most jealous of their friendships. And when a prized friendship is being impinged on by the man one loathes more than anything else in the world — ! All in all, by simply imagining myself in Hugh's place and looking across the table at Raymond who was gaily and unconcernedly holding forth, I was prepared for the worst.

The opportunity for it came to Hugh when Raymond was deep in a discussion of the devices used in effecting escapes. They were innumerable, he said. Almost anything one could seize on would serve as such a device. A wire, a scrap of metal, even a bit of paper — at one time or another he had used them all.

"But of them all," he said with a sudden solemnity, "there is only one I would stake my life on. Strange, it is one you cannot see, cannot hold in your hand — in fact, for many people it does not even exist. Yet, it is the one I have used most often and which has never failed me."

The doctor leaned forward, his eyes bright with interest. "And it is — ?"

"It is a knowledge of people, my friend. Or, as it may be put, a knowledge of human nature. To me it is as vital an instrument as the scalpel is to you."

"Oh?" said Hugh, and his voice was so sharp that all eyes were instantly turned on him. "You make sleight of hand sound like a department of psychology."

"Perhaps," Raymond said, and I saw he was watching Hugh now, gauging him. "You see there is no great mystery in the matter. My profession — my art, as I like to think of it — is no more than the art of misdirection, and I am but one of its many practitioners."

"I wouldn't say there were many escape artists around nowadays," the doctor remarked.

"True," Raymond said, "but you will observe I referred to the art of misdirection. The escape artist,

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the master of legerdemain, these are a handful who practise the most exotic form of that art. But what of those who engage in the work of politics, of advertising, of salesmanship?" He laid his finger along his nose in the familiar gesture, and winked. "I am afraid they have all made my art their business."

The doctor smiled. "Since you haven't dragged medicine into it I'm willing to go along with you," he said. "But what I want to know is, exactly how does this knowledge of human nature work in your profession?"

"In this way," Raymond said. "One must judge a person carefully. Then, if he finds in that person certain weaknesses, he can state a false premise and it will be accepted without question. Once the false premise is swallowed, the rest is easy. The victim will then see only what the magician wants him to see, or will give his vote to that politician, or will buy merchandise because of that advertising." He shrugged. "And that is all there is to it."

"Is it?" Hugh said. "But what happens when you're with people who have some intelligence and won't swallow your false premise? How do you do your tricks then? Or do you keep them on the same level as selling beads to the savages?"

"Now that's uncalled for, Hugh," the doctor said. "The man's expressing his ideas. No reason to make an issue of them."

"Maybe there is," Hugh said, his eyes fixed on Raymond. "I have found he's full of interesting ideas. I was wondering how far he'd want to go in backing them up."

Raymond touched the napkin to his lips with a precise little flick, and then laid it carefully on the table before him. "In short," he said, addressing himself to Hugh, "you want a small demonstration of my art."

"It depends," Hugh said. "I don't want any trick cigarette cases or rabbits out of hats or any damn nonsense like that. I'd like to see something good."

"Something good," echoed Raymond reflectively. He looked around the room, studied it, and then turned to Hugh, pointing toward the huge oak door which was closed between the dining room and the living room, where we had gathered before dinner.

"That door is not locked, is it?"

"No," Hugh said, "it isn't. It hasn't been locked for years."

"But there is a key to it?"

Hugh pulled out his key chain, and with an effort detached a heavy, old-fashioned key. "Yes, it's the same one we use for the butler's pantry." He was becoming interested despite himself.

"Good. No, do not give it to me. Give it to the doctor. You have faith in the doctor's honor, I am sure?"

"Yes," said Hugh drily, "I have."

"Very well. Now, Doctor, will you please go to that door and lock it."

The doctor marched to the door, with his firm, decisive tread, thrust

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the key into the lock, and turned it. The click of the bolt snapping into place was loud in the silence of the room. The doctor returned to the table holding the key, but Raymond motioned it away. "It must not leave your hand or everything is lost," he warned.

"Now," Raymond said, "for the finale I approach the door, I flick my handkerchief at it —" the handkerchief barely brushed the keyhole "— and presto, the door is unlocked!"

The doctor went to it. He seized the doorknob, twisted it dubiously, and then watched with genuine astonishment as the door swung silently open.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said.

"Somehow," Elizabeth laughed, "a false premise went down easy as an oyster."

Only Hugh reflected a sense of personal outrage. "All right," he demanded, "how was it done? How did you work it?"

"I?" Raymond said reproachfully, and smiled at all of us with obvious enjoyment. "It was you who did it all. I used only my little knowledge of human nature to help you along the way."

I said, "I can guess part of it. That door was set in advance, and when the doctor thought he was locking it, he wasn't. He was really unlocking it. Isn't that the answer?"

Raymond nodded. "Very much the answer. The door *was* locked in advance. I made sure of that, because with a little forethought I suspected there would be such a challenge during the evening, and this was the simplest way of preparing for it. I merely made certain that I was the last one to enter this room, and when I did I used this." He held up his hand so that we could see the sliver of metal in it. "An ordinary skeleton key, of course, but sufficient for an old and primitive lock."

For a moment Raymond looked grave, then he continued brightly, "It was our host himself who stated the false premise when he said the door was unlocked. He was a man so sure of himself that he would not think to test anything so obvious. The doctor is also a man who is sure, and he fell into the same trap. It is, as you now see, a little dangerous always to be so sure."

"I'll go along with that," the doctor said ruefully, "even though it's heresy to admit it in my line of work." He playfully tossed the key he had been holding across the table to Hugh who let it fall in front of him and made no gesture toward it. "Well, Hugh, like it or not, you must admit the man has proved his point."

"Do I?" said Hugh softly. He sat there smiling a little now, and it was easy to see he was turning some thought over and over in his head.

"Oh, come on, man," the doctor said with some impatience. "You were taken in as much as we were. You know that."

"Of course you were, darling," Elizabeth agreed.

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I think that she suddenly saw her opportunity to turn the proceedings into the peace conference she had aimed at, but I could have told her she was choosing her time badly. There was a look in Hugh's eye I didn't like — a veiled look which wasn't natural to him. Ordinarily, when he was really angered, he would blow up a violent storm, and once the thunder and lightning had passed he would be honestly apologetic. But this present mood of his was different. There was a slumbrous quality in it which alarmed me.

He hooked one arm over the back of his chair and rested the other on the table, sitting halfway around to fix his eyes on Raymond. "I seem to be a minority of one," he remarked, "but I'm sorry to say I found your little trick disappointing. Not that it wasn't cleverly done — I'll grant that, all right — but because it wasn't any more than you'd expect from a competent blacksmith."

"Now there's a large helping of sour grapes," the doctor jeered.

Hugh shook his head. "No, I'm simply saying that where there's a lock on a door and the key to it in your hand, it's no great trick to open it. Considering our friend's reputation, I thought we'd see more from him than that."

Raymond grimaced. "Since I had hoped to entertain," he said, "I must apologize for disappointing."

"Oh, as far as entertainment goes I have no complaints. But for a real test —"

"A real test?"

"Yes, something a little different. Let's say, a door without any locks or keys to tamper with. A closed door which can be opened with a fingertip, but which is nevertheless impossible to open. How does that sound to you?"

Raymond narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, as if he were considering the picture being presented to him. "It sounds most interesting," he said at last. "Tell me more about it."

"No," Hugh said, and from the sudden eagerness in his voice I felt that this was the exact moment he had been looking for. "I'll do better than that. I'll *show* it to you."

He stood up brusquely and the rest of us followed suit — except Elizabeth, who remained in her seat. When I asked her if she wanted to come along, she only shook her head and sat there watching us hopelessly as we left the room.

We were bound for the cellars, I realized when Hugh picked up a flashlight along the way, but for a part of the cellars I had never seen before. On a few occasions I had gone downstairs to help select a bottle of wine from the racks there, but now we walked past the wine vault and into a long, dimly lit chamber behind it. Our feet scraped loudly on the rough stone, the walls around us showed the stains of seepage, and warm as the night was outside, I could feel the chill of dampness turning my chest to gooseflesh. When the doctor shuddered and said hollowly, "These

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are the very tombs of Atlantis," I knew I wasn't alone in my feeling, and felt some relief at that.

We stopped at the very end of the chamber, before what I can best describe as a stone closet built from floor to ceiling in the farthest angle of the walls. It was about four feet wide and not quite twice that in length, and its open doorway showed impenetrable blackness inside. Hugh reached into the blackness and pulled a heavy door into place.

"That's it," he said abruptly. "Plain solid wood, four inches thick, fitted flush into the frame so that it's almost airtight. It's a beautiful piece of carpentry, too, the kind they practised two hundred years ago. And no locks or bolts. Just a ring set into each side to use as a handle." He pushed the door gently and it swung open noiselessly at his touch. "See that? The whole thing is balanced so perfectly on the hinges that it moves like a feather."

"But what's it for?" I asked. "It must have been made for a reason."

Hugh laughed shortly. "It was. Back in the bad old days, when a servant committed a crime — and I don't suppose it had to be more of a crime than talking back to one of the ancient Loziers — he was put in here to repent. And since the air inside was good for only a few hours at the most, he either repented damn soon or not at all."

"And that door?" the doctor said cautiously. "That impressive door of yours which opens at a touch to provide all the air needed — what prevented the servant from opening it?"

"Look," Hugh said. He flashed his light inside the cell and we crowded behind him to peer in. The circle of light reached across the cell to its far wall and picked out a short, heavy chain hanging a little above head level with a U-shaped collar dangling from its bottom link.

"I see," Raymond said, and they were the first words I had heard him speak since we had left the dining room. "It is truly ingenious. The man stands with his back against the wall, facing the door. The collar is placed around his neck, and then — since it is clearly not made for a lock — it is clamped there, hammered around his neck. The door is closed, and the man spends the next few hours like someone on an invisible rack, reaching out with his feet to catch the ring on the door which is just out of reach. If he is lucky he may not strangle himself in his iron collar, but may live until someone chooses to open the door for him."

"My God," the doctor said. "You make me feel as if I were living through it."

Raymond smiled faintly. "I have lived through many such experiences, and, believe me, the reality is always a little worse than the worst imaginings. There is always the ultimate moment of terror, of panic, when the heart pounds so madly you think it will burst through your ribs, and the cold sweat soaks clear through you in the space of one breath. That is when

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you must take yourself in hand, must dispel all weakness, and remember all the lessons you have ever learned. If not —!" He whisked the edge of his hand across his lean throat. "Unfortunately for the usual victim of such a device," he concluded sadly, "since he lacks the essential courage and knowledge to help himself, he succumbs."

"But you wouldn't," Hugh said.

"I have no reason to think so."

"You mean," and the eagerness was creeping back into Hugh's voice, stronger than ever, "that under the very same conditions as someone chained in there two hundred years ago you could get this door open?"

The challenging note was too strong to be brushed aside lightly. Raymond stood silent for a long minute, face strained with concentration, before he answered.

"Yes," he said. "It would not be easy — the problem is made formidable by its very simplicity — but it could be solved."

"How long do you think it would take you?"

"An hour at the most."

Hugh had come a long way around to get to this point. He asked the question slowly, savoring it. "Would you want to bet on that?"

"Now, wait a minute," the doctor said. "I don't like any part of this."

"And I vote we adjourn for a drink," I put in. "Fun's fun, but we'll all wind up with pneumonia, playing games down here."

Neither Hugh nor Raymond appeared to hear a word of this. They stood staring at each other — Hugh waiting on pins and needles, Raymond deliberating — until Raymond said, "What is this bet you offer?"

"This. If you lose, you get out of the Dane house inside of a month, and sell it to me."

"And if I win?"

It was not easy for Hugh to say it, but he finally got it out. "Then I'll be the one to get out. And if you don't want to buy Hilltop I'll arrange to sell it to the first comer."

For anyone who knew Hugh it was so fantastic, so staggering a statement to hear from him, that none of us could find words at first. It was the doctor who recovered most quickly.

"You're not speaking for yourself, Hugh," he warned. "You're a married man. Elizabeth's feelings have to be considered."

"Is it a bet?" Hugh demanded of Raymond. "Do you want to go through with it?"

"I think before I answer that, there is something to be explained." Raymond paused, then went on slowly, "I am afraid I gave the impression — out of false pride, perhaps — that when I retired from my work it was because of a boredom, a lack of interest in it. That was not altogether the truth. In reality, I was required to go to a doctor some years ago, the doctor listened to the heart, and suddenly my heart became the most important thing in the world. I tell you this because while your challenge strikes me as being a most unusual

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and interesting way of settling differences between neighbors, I must reject it for reasons of health."

"You were healthy enough a minute ago," Hugh said in a hard voice.

"Perhaps not as much as you would want to think, my friend."

"In other words," Hugh said bitterly, "there's no accomplice handy, no keys in your pocket to help out, and no way of tricking anyone into seeing what isn't there! So you have to admit you're beaten."

Raymond stiffened. "I admit no such thing. All the tools I would need even for such a test as this I have with me. Believe me, they would be enough."

Hugh laughed aloud, and the sound of it broke into small echoes all down the corridors behind us. It was that sound, I am sure — the living contempt in it rebounding from wall to wall around us — which sent Raymond into the cell.

Hugh wielded the hammer, a short-handled but heavy sledge, which tightened the collar into a circlet around Raymond's neck, hitting with hard even strokes at the iron which was braced against the wall. When he was finished I saw the pale glow of the radium-painted numbers on a watch as Raymond studied it in his pitch darkness.

"It is now eleven," he said calmly. "The wager is that by midnight this door must be opened, and it does not matter what means are used. Those are the conditions, and you gentlemen are the witnesses to them."

Then the door was closed, and the walking began.

Back and forth we walked — the three of us — as if we were being compelled to trace every possible geometric figure on that stony floor. The doctor with his quick, impatient step, and I matching Hugh's long, nervous strides. A foolish, meaningless march, back and forth across our own shadows, each of us marking the time by counting off the passing seconds, and each ashamed to be the first to look at his watch.

For a while there was a counterpoint to this scraping of feet from inside the cell. It was a barely perceptible clinking of chain coming at brief, regular intervals. Then there would be a long silence, followed by a renewal of the sound. When it stopped again I could not restrain myself any long. I held up my watch toward the dim yellowish light of the bulb overhead and saw with dismay that barely twenty minutes had passed.

After that there was no hesitancy in the others about looking at the time, and, if anything, this made it harder to bear than just wondering. I caught the doctor winding his watch with small, brisk turns, and then a few minutes later try to wind it again, and suddenly drop his hand with disgust as he realized he had already done it. Hugh walked with his watch held up near his eyes, as if by concentration on it he could drag that crawling minute hand faster around the dial.

Thirty minutes had passed.

Forty.

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Forty-five.

I remember that when I looked at my watch and saw there were less than fifteen minutes to go I wondered if I could last out even that short time. The chill had sunk so deep into me that I ached with it. I was shocked when I saw that Hugh's face was dripping with sweat, and that beads of it gathered and ran off while I watched.

It was while I was looking at him in fascination that it happened. The sound broke through the walls of the cell like a wail of agony heard from far away, and shivered over us as if it were spelling out the words.

"*Doctor!*" it cried. "*The air!*"

It was Raymond's voice, but the thickness of the wall blocking it off turned it into a high, thin sound. What was clearest in it was the note of pure terror, the plea growing out of that terror.

"*Air!*" it screamed, the word bubbling and dissolving into a long-drawn sound which made no sense at all.

And then it was silent.

We leaped for the door together, but Hugh was there first, his back against it, barring the way. In his upraised hand was the hammer which had clinched Raymond's collar.

"Keep back!" he cried. "Don't come any nearer, I warn you!"

The fury in him, brought home by the menace of the weapon, stopped us in our tracks.

"Hugh," the doctor pleaded, "I know what you're thinking, but you can forget that now. The bet's off, and I'm opening the door on my own responsibility. You have my word for that."

"Do I? But do you remember the terms of the bet, Doctor? This door must be opened within an hour — *and it doesn't matter what means are used!* Do you understand now? He's fooling both of you. He's faking a death scene, so that you'll push open the door and win his bet for him. But it's my bet, not yours, and I have the last word on it!"

I saw from the way he talked, despite the shaking tension in his voice, that he was in perfect command of himself, and it made everything seem that much worse.

"How do you know he's faking?" I demanded. "The man said he had a heart condition. He said there was always a time in a spot like this when he had to fight panic and could feel the strain of it. What right do you have to gamble with his life?"

"Damn it, don't you see he never mentioned any heart condition until he smelled a bet in the wind? Don't you see he set his trap that way, just as he locked the door behind him when he came into dinner! But this time nobody will spring it for him — nobody!"

"Listen to me," the doctor said, and his voice cracked like a whip. "Do you concede that there's one slim possibility of that man being dead in there, or dying?"

"Yes, it is possible — anything is possible."

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"I'm not trying to split hairs with you! I'm telling you that if that man is in trouble every second counts, and you're stealing that time from him. And if that's the case, by God, I'll sit in the witness chair at your trial and swear you murdered him! Is that what you want?"

Hugh's head sank forward on his chest, but his hand still tightly gripped the hammer. I could hear the breath drawing heavily in his throat, and when he raised his head, his face was gray and haggard. The torment of indecision was written in every pale sweating line of it.

And then I suddenly understood what Raymond had meant that day when he told Hugh about the revelation he might find in the face of a perfect dilemma. It was the revelation of what a man may learn about himself when he is forced to look into his own depths, and Hugh had found it at last.

In that shadowy cellar, while the relentless seconds thundered louder and louder in our ears, we waited to see what he would do.

EDITORS' NOTE: *Now that you have finished Mr. Ellin's story, you realize that it belongs in the great tradition of "challenge" tales — in the literary stream of Mark Twain's "Awful, Terrible Medieval Romance" (1871), Frank R. Stockton's "The Lady, or the Tiger?" (1884), and W. W. Jacobs's "The Lost Ship" (1898). You also realize that Mr. Ellin's story does not merely recreate a riddle of the past, or simply offer a new variation. Actually, it is an extension of the great tradition — a 1955 version which reveals one of the most serious dilemmas of our time.*

Will you pardon the Editors if, for another paragraph or two, we "think out loud?" It seems to us that Mr. Ellin's story calls for more than the usual "reader participation" . . . Entirely apart from the question of whether Raymond did or did not have a weak heart, we are left with this speculation: What did Hugh decide to do? To win his bet — at any cost, possibly of his very soul? Or to lose the bet — and thus become a man of heart and conscience as well as of brain?

In the sense of posing a problem and giving no solution in the story itself, Mr. Ellin follows in the footsteps of Mark Twain and Frank R. Stockton. But "The Moment of Decision" is not a pure riddle like "Awful, Terrible Medieval Romance" or "The Lady, or the Tiger?" Those earlier classics presented the reader with unanswerable questions; Mr. Ellin's riddle is *answerable. Readers have but to look into their own hearts: for it is really your dilemma too — the dilemma of people everywhere — the dilemma of nations, even of civilizations, in this new atomic age.*

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FROM THE GOLDEN ERA

Who would you say are The Big Three among the active mystery writers of the world? The 'Tec Triumvirate of today? The genuine Old Masters? Well, readers and reviewers might disagree, but we would be surprised if Agatha Christie did not receive an almost unanimous vote. So it is a particularly happy occasion for us to announce that in this issue we commence a series of six stories by Agatha Christie — six ingenious adventures in detection about that extraordinary exerciser of "little gray cells," the one and only Hercule Poirot.

All six of these tales come from Agatha Christie's THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD *period — that golden era of the detective story that witnessed the publication in England of such keystones as Freeman Wills Crofts's* INSPECTOR FRENCH'S GREATEST CASE, *Philip MacDonald's* THE RASP, *and Edgar Wallace's* THE MIND OF MR. J. G. REEDER — *historical highspots all; the same golden era that brought forth in the United States such Koh-i-noors as Earl Derr Biggers's* THE HOUSE WITHOUT A KEY, *the first Charlie Chan book, and S. S. Van Dine's* THE BENSON MURDER CASE, *the first Philo Vance book — equally historical highspots; the same golden era that produced from the so-called "serious" writers such masterpieces of crime as the Irish classic, Liam O'Flaherty's* THE INFORMER, *the British classic, C. S. Forester's* PAYMENT DEFERRED, *and the American classic, Theodore Dreiser's* AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY — *also historical highspots by authors not the slightest bit ashamed to write about crime, detection, and mystery.*

Yes, it is from this golden era of pure detective stories in the grand manner, of good oldtime sleuthing in the classical tradition, that we bring you these six Agatha Christie stories about the pompous and perceptive Poirot. Thus you know what to expect: a ratiocinative return to the great gambits — tales, for example, about a sinister playing card and murder at a ball, cases that at the start look too trivial to be bothered with but in the end prove to be titanic tragedies — and, yes, even that old standby, the theft of government papers (but who can resist the chase after missing documents whose loss would shake the very foundations of the Empire?). But we hasten to remind you: there is always Agatha Christie's special touch . . .

And so we begin with one of Agatha Christie's favorite beginnings — murder on a train.

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THE GIRL IN ELECTRIC BLUE

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

ALEC SIMPSON, R.N., STEPPED FROM the platform at Newton Abbot into a first-class compartment of the Plymouth Express. A porter followed him with a heavy suitcase. He was about to swing it up to the rack, but the young sailor stopped him.

"No — leave it on the seat. I'll put it up later. Here you are."

"Thank you, sir." The porter, generously tipped, withdrew.

Doors banged; a stentorian voice shouted: "Plymouth only. Change for Torquay. Plymouth next stop." Then a whistle blew, and the train drew slowly out of the station.

Lieutenant Simpson had the carriage to himself. The December air was chilly, and he pulled up the window. Then he sniffed vaguely, and frowned. What a smell there was! Reminded him of that time in hospital, and the operation on his leg. Yes, chloroform; that was it!

He let the window down again, changing his seat to one with its back to the engine. He pulled a pipe out of his pocket and lit it. For a little time he sat inactive, looking out into the night and smoking.

At last he roused himself, and opening the suitcase, took out some papers and magazines, then closed the suitcase again and endeavored to shove it under the opposite seat — without success. Some hidden obstacle resisted it. He shoved harder with rising impatience, but it still stuck out halfway into the carriage.

"Why the devil won't it go in?" he muttered, and hauling it out completely, he stooped down and peered under the seat. . . .

A moment later a cry rang out into the night, and the great train came to an unwilling halt in obedience to the imperative jerking of the communication cord.

"*Mon ami*," said Hercule Poirot, "you have, I know, been deeply interested in this mystery of the Plymouth Express. Read this."

I picked up the note he flicked across the table to me. It was brief and to the point.

Dear Sir:

I shall be obliged if you will call upon me at your earliest convenience.

Yours faithfully,
EBENEZER HALLIDAY

The connection was not clear to my mind, and I looked inquiringly at Poirot.

For answer he took up the newspaper and read aloud:

"'A sensational discovery was made last night. A young naval officer re-

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turning to Plymouth found under the seat of his compartment, the body of a woman, stabbed through the heart. The officer at once pulled the communication cord, and the train was brought to a standstill. The woman, who was about thirty years of age, and richly dressed, has not yet been identified.'

"And later we have this: 'The woman found dead in the Plymouth Express has been identified as the Honorable Mrs. Rupert Carrington.' You see now, my friend? Or if you do not, I will add this — Mrs. Rupert Carrington was, before her marriage, Flossie Halliday, daughter of old man Halliday, the steel king of America."

"And he has sent for you? Splendid!"

"I did him a little service in the past — an affair of bearer bonds. And once, when I was in Paris for a royal visit, I had Mademoiselle Flossie pointed out to me. *La jolie petite pensionnaire!* She had the *jolie dot* too! It caused trouble. She nearly made a bad affair."

"How was that?"

"A certain Count de la Rochefour. *Un bien mauvais sujet!* A bad hat, as you would say. An adventurer pure and simple, who knew how to appeal to a romantic young girl. Luckily, her father got wind of it in time. He took her back to America in haste. I heard of her marriage some years later, but I know nothing of her husband."

"H'm," I said. "The Honorable Rupert Carrington is no beauty, by all accounts. He'd pretty well run through his own money on the turf, and I should imagine old man Halliday's dollars came along in the nick of time. I should say that for a good-looking, well-mannered, utterly unscrupulous young scoundrel, it would be hard to find his match!"

"Ah, the poor little lady! *Elle n'est pas bien tombée!*"

"I fancy he made it pretty obvious at once that it was her money, and not she, that had attracted him. I believe they drifted apart almost at once. I have heard rumors lately that there was to be a definite legal separation."

"Old man Halliday is no fool. He would tie up her money pretty tight."

"I daresay. Anyway, I know as a fact that the Honorable Rupert is said to be extremely hard up."

"Ah-ha! I wonder —"

"You wonder what?"

"My good friend, do not jump down my throat like that. You are interested, I see. Supposing you accompany me to see Mr. Halliday. There is a taxi stand at the corner."

A few minutes sufficed to whirl us to the superb house in Park Lane rented by the American magnate. We were shown into the library, and almost immediately we were joined by a large, stout man, with piercing eyes and an aggressive chin.

"M. Poirot?" said Mr. Halliday. "I guess I don't need to tell you what I want you for. You've read the papers, and I'm never one to let the grass grow under my feet. I happened

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to hear you were in London, and I remembered the good work you did over those bonds. Never forget a name. I've got the pick of Scotland Yard, but I'll have my own man as well. Money no object. All the dollars were made for my little girl — and now she's gone, I'll spend my last cent to catch the damned scoundrel that did it! See? So it's up to you to deliver the goods."

Poirot bowed.

"I accept, monsieur, all the more willingly that I saw your daughter in Paris several times. And now I will ask you to tell me the circumstances of her journey to Plymouth and any other details that seem to you to bear upon the case."

"Well, to begin with," responded Halliday, "she wasn't going to Plymouth. She was going to join a house party at Avonmead Court, the Duchess of Swansea's place. She left London by the 12:14 from Paddington, arriving at Bristol (where she had to change) at 2:50. The principal Plymouth expresses, of course, run via Westbury, and do not go near Bristol at all. The 12:14 does a nonstop run to Bristol, afterward stopping at Weston, Taunton, Exeter, and Newton Abbot. My daughter traveled alone in her carriage, which was reserved as far as Bristol, her maid being in a third-class carriage in the next coach."

Poirot nodded, and Mr. Halliday went on: "The party at Avonmead Court was to be a very gay one, with several balls, and in consequence my daughter had with her nearly all her jewels — amounting in value, perhaps, to about a hundred thousand dollars."

"*Un moment*," interrupted Poirot. "Who had charge of the jewels? Your daughter, or the maid?"

"My daughter always took charge of them herself, carrying them in a small blue morocco case."

"Continue, monsieur."

"At Bristol the maid, Jane Mason, collected her mistress' dressing-bag and wraps, which were with her, and came to the door of Flossie's compartment. To her intense surprise, my daughter told her that she was not getting out at Bristol, but was going on farther. She directed Mason to get out the luggage and put it in the cloakroom. She could have tea in the refreshment room, but she was to wait at the station for her mistress, who would return to Bristol in the course of the afternoon. The maid, although very much astonished, did as she was told. She put the luggage in the cloakroom and had some tea. But return train after return train came in, and her mistress did not appear. After the arrival of the last train, she left the luggage where it was, and went to a hotel near the station for the night. This morning she read of the tragedy, and returned to town by the first available train."

"Is there nothing to account for your daughter's sudden change of plan?"

"Well, there is this: According to

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Jane Mason, at Bristol, Flossie was no longer alone in her carriage. There was a man in it who stood looking out of the farther window so that she could not see his face."

"The train was a corridor one, of course?"

"Yes."

"Which side was the corridor?"

"On the platform side. My daughter was standing in the corridor as she talked to Mason."

"And there is no doubt in your mind — excuse me!" Poirot got up, and carefully straightened the inkstand which was a little askew. "*Je vous demande pardon*," he continued, reseating himself. "It affects my nerves to see anything crooked. Strange, is it not? I was saying, monsieur, that there is no doubt in your mind as to this probably unexpected meeting being the cause of your daughter's sudden change of plan?"

"It seems the only reasonable supposition."

"You have no idea who the gentleman in question might be?"

The millionaire hesitated for a moment, and then replied:

"No — I do not know at all."

"Now — as to the discovery of the body?"

"It was discovered by a young naval officer who at once gave the alarm. There was a doctor on the train. He examined the body. She had been first chloroformed, and then stabbed. He gave it as his opinion that she had been dead about four hours, so it must have been done not long after leaving Bristol — probably between there and Weston, possibly between Weston and Taunton."

"And the jewel case?"

"The jewel case, M. Poirot, was missing."

"One thing more, monsieur. Your daughter's fortune — to whom does it pass at her death?"

"Flossie made a will soon after her marriage, leaving everything to her husband." Halliday hesitated for a minute, and then went on: "I may as well tell you, Monsieur Poirot, that I regard my son-in-law as an unprincipled scoundrel, and that, by my advice, my daughter was on the eve of freeing herself from him by legal means — no difficult matter. I settled her money upon her in such a way that he could not touch it during her lifetime, but although they have lived entirely apart for some years, she frequently acceded to his demands for money, rather than face an open scandal. However, I was determined to put an end to this. At last Flossie agreed, and my lawyers were instructed to take proceedings."

"And where is Monsieur Carrington?"

"In town. I believe he was away in the country yesterday, but he returned last night."

Poirot considered a little while. Then he said: "I think that is all, monsieur."

"You would like to see the maid, Jane Mason?"

"If you please."

Halliday rang the bell, and gave a

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brief order to the footman. A few minutes later Jane Mason entered the room, a respectable, hard-featured woman, as emotionless in the face of tragedy as only a good servant can be.

"You will permit me to put a few questions? Your mistress, she was quite as usual before starting yesterday morning? Not excited or flurried?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"But at Bristol she was quite different?"

"Yes, sir, regular upset — so nervous she didn't seem to know what she was saying."

"What did she say exactly?"

"Well, sir, as near as I can remember, she said: 'Mason, I've got to alter my plans. Something has happened — I mean, I'm not getting out here after all. I must go on. Get out the luggage and put it in the cloakroom; then have some tea, and wait for me in the station.'

"'Wait for you here, ma'am?' I asked.

"'Yes, yes. Don't leave the station. I shall return by a later train. I don't know when. It mayn't be until quite late.'

"'Very well, ma'am,' I says. It wasn't my place to ask questions, but I thought it very strange."

"It was unlike your mistress, eh?"

"Very unlike her, sir."

"What did you think?"

"Well, sir, I thought it was to do with the gentleman in the carriage. She didn't speak to him, but she turned round once or twice as though to ask him if she was doing right."

"But you didn't see the gentleman's face?"

"No, sir; he stood with his back to me all the time."

"Can you describe him at all?"

"He had on a light fawn overcoat, and a traveling cap. He was tall and slender, like, and the back of his head was dark."

"You didn't know him?"

"Oh, no, I don't think so, sir."

"It was not your master, Mr. Carrington, by any chance?"

Mason looked rather startled.

"Oh! I don't think so, sir!"

"But you are not *sure*?"

"He was about the master's build, sir — but I never thought of it being him. We so seldom saw him. . . . I couldn't say it *wasn't* him!"

Poirot picked up a pin from the carpet, and frowned at it severely; then he continued: "Would it be possible for the man to have entered the train at Bristol before you reached the carriage?"

Mason considered.

"Yes, sir, I think it would. My compartment was very crowded, and it was some minutes before I could get out — and then there was a very large crowd on the platform, and that delayed me too. But he'd only have had a minute or two to speak to the mistress, that way. I took it for granted that he'd come along the corridor."

"That is more probable, certainly."

Poirot paused, still frowning.

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"You know how the mistress was dressed, sir?" asked the maid.

"The papers give a few details, but I would like you to confirm them."

"She was wearing a white fox fur toque, sir, with a white spotted veil, and a blue coat and skirt — the shade of blue they call electric."

"H'm, rather striking."

"Yes," remarked Mr. Halliday. "Inspector Japp is in hopes that that may help us to fix the spot where the crime took place. Anyone who saw her would remember her."

"*Précisément!* — Thank you, mademoiselle."

The maid left the room.

"Well!" Poirot got up briskly. "That is all I can do here — except, monsieur, that I would ask you to tell me everything — but *everything!*"

"I have done so."

"You are sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Then there is nothing more to be said. I must decline the case."

"Why?"

"Because you have not been frank with me."

"I assure you —"

"No, you are keeping something back."

There was a moment's pause, and then Halliday drew a paper from his pocket and handed it to my friend.

"I guess that's what you're after, Monsieur Poirot — though how you know about it stumps me!"

Poirot smiled, and unfolded the paper. It was a letter written in thin sloping handwriting. Poirot read it aloud.

"'Chère Madame:

"'It is with infinite pleasure that I look forward to the felicity of meeting you again. After your so amiable reply to my letter, I can hardly restrain my impatience. I have never forgotten those days in Paris. It is most cruel that you should be leaving London tomorrow. However, before very long, and perhaps sooner than you think, I shall have the joy of beholding once more the lady whose image has ever reigned supreme in my heart.

"'Believe, chère madame, all the assurances of my most devoted and unaltered sentiments —

"'Armand de la Rochefour.'"

Poirot handed the letter back to Halliday with a bow.

"I fancy, monsieur, that you did not know that your daughter intended renewing her acquaintance with the Count de la Rochefour?"

"It came as a thunderbolt to me! I found this letter in my daughter's handbag. As you probably know, Monsieur Poirot, this so-called count is an adventurer of the worst type."

Poirot nodded.

"But I want to know how you knew of the existence of this letter?"

My friend smiled. "Monsieur, I did not. But to track footmarks and recognize cigarette ash is not sufficient for a detective. He must also be a good psychologist. I knew that you disliked and mistrusted your son-in-

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law. He benefits by your daughter's death; the maid's description of the mysterious man bears a sufficient resemblance to him. Yet you are not keen on his track! Why? Surely because your suspicions lie in another direction. Therefore you were keeping something back."

"You're right, Monsieur Poirot. I was sure of Rupert's guilt until I found this letter. It unsettled me horribly."

"Yes. The Count says: 'Before very long, and perhaps sooner than you think.' Obviously he would not want to wait until you should get wind of his reappearance. Was it he who traveled down from London by the 12:14, and came along the corridor to your daughter's compartment? The Count de la Rochefour is also, if I remember rightly, tall and dark."

The millionaire nodded.

"Well, monsieur, I will wish you good day. Scotland Yard, has, I presume, a list of the jewels?"

"Yes. I believe Inspector Japp is here now if you would like to see him."

Japp was an old friend of ours, and greeted Poirot with a sort of affectionate contempt.

"And how are you, monsieur? No bad feeling between us, though we *have* got our different ways of looking at things. How are the 'little gray cells,' eh? Going strong?"

Poirot beamed upon him. "They function, my good Japp; assuredly they do!"

"Then that's all right. Think it was the Honorable Rupert, or a crook? We're keeping an eye on all the regular places, of course. We shall know if the shiners are disposed of, and of course whoever did it isn't going to keep them to admire their sparkle. Not likely! I'm trying to find out where Rupert Carrington was yesterday. Seems a bit of a mystery about it. I've got a man watching him."

"A great precaution, but perhaps a day late," suggested Poirot gently.

"You always will have your joke, Monsieur Poirot. Well, I'm off to Paddington. Bristol, Weston, Taunton, that's my beat. So long."

"You will come round and see me this evening, and tell me the result?"

"Sure thing, if I'm back."

"That good Inspector believes in matter in motion," murmured Poirot as our friend departed. "He travels, he measures footprints, he collects mud and cigarette ash. He is extremely busy! He is zealous beyond words! And if I mentioned psychology to him, do you know what he would do, my friend? He would smile! He would say to himself: 'Poor old Poirot! He ages! He grows senile!' Japp is the 'younger generation knocking on the door.' And *ma foi!* They are so busy knocking that they do not notice that the door is open!"

"And what are you going to do?"

"As we have *carte blanche*, I shall expend threepence in ringing up the Ritz — where you may have noticed our Count is staying. After that, as my feet are a little damp, and I have

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sneezed twice, I shall return to my rooms and make myself a *tisano* over the spirit lamp."

I did not see Poirot again until the following morning. I found him placidly finishing his breakfast.

"Well?" I inquired eagerly. "What has happened?"

"Nothing."

"But Japp?"

"I have not seen him."

"The Count?"

"He left the Ritz the day before yesterday."

"The day of the murder?"

"Yes."

"Then that settles it! Rupert Carrington is cleared."

"Because the Count de la Rochefour has left the Ritz? You go too fast, my friend."

"Anyway, he must be followed, arrested! But what is his motive?"

"One hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewelry is a very good motive for anyone. No, the question to my mind is: why *kill* her? Why not simply steal the jewels? She would not prosecute."

"Why not?"

"Because she is a woman, *mon ami*. She once loved this man. Therefore she would suffer her loss in silence. And the Count, who is an extremely good psychologist where women are concerned — hence his successes — would know that perfectly well. On the other hand, if Rupert Carrington killed her, why take the jewels, which would incriminate him fatally?"

"As a blind."

"Perhaps you are right, my friend. Ah, here is Japp! I recognize his knock."

The Inspector was beaming good-humoredly.

"Morning, Poirot. Only just got back. I've done some good work! And you?"

"Me, I have arranged my ideas," replied Poirot placidly.

Japp laughed heartily.

"Old chap's getting on in years," he observed beneath his breath to me. "That won't do for us young folk," he said aloud.

"*Quel dommage?*" Poirot inquired.

"Well, do you want to hear what I've done?"

"You permit me to make a guess? You have found the knife with which the crime was committed, by the side of the line between Weston and Taunton, and you have questioned the paper boy who spoke to Mrs. Carrington at Weston."

Japp's jaw fell. "How on earth did you know? Don't tell me it was those almighty 'little gray cells' of yours!"

"I am glad you admit for once that they are *all mighty!* Tell me, did she give the paper boy a shilling for himself?"

"No, it was half a crown!" Japp had recovered his temper, and grinned. "Pretty extravagant, these rich Americans!"

"And in consequence the boy did not forget her?"

"Not he. Half-crowns don't come his way every day. She hailed him

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and bought two magazines. One had a picture of a girl in blue on the cover. 'That'll match me,' she said. Oh! He remembered her perfectly. Well, that was enough for me. By the doctor's evidence, the crime *must* have been committed before Taunton. I guessed they'd throw the knife away at once, and I walked down the line looking for it; and sure enough, there it was. I made inquiries at Taunton about our man, but of course it's a big station, and it wasn't likely they'd notice him. He probably got back to London by a later train."

Poirot nodded. "Very likely."

"But I found another bit of news when I got back. They're passing the jewels, all right! That large emerald was pawned last night — by one of the regular lot. Who do you think it was?"

"I don't know — except that he was a short man."

Japp stared. "Well, you're right there. He's short. It was Red Narky."

"Who is Red Narky?" I asked.

"A particularly sharp jewel thief, sir. And not one to stick at murder. Usually works with a woman — Gracie Kidd; but she doesn't seem to be in it this time — unless she's got off to Holland with the rest of the swag."

"You've arrested Narky?"

"Sure thing. But mind you, it's the other man we want — the man who went down with Mrs. Carrington in the train. He was the one who planned the job, right enough. But Narky won't squeal on a pal."

I noticed that Poirot's eyes had become very green.

"I think," he said gently, "that I can find Narky's pal for you, all right."

"One of your little ideas, eh?" Japp eyed Poirot sharply. "Wonderful how you manage to deliver the goods sometimes, at your age and all. Devil's own luck, of course."

"Perhaps, perhaps," murmured my friend. "Hastings, my hat. And the brush. So! My galoshes, if it still rains! We must not undo the good work of that *tisano*. *Au revoir*, Japp!"

"Good luck to you, Poirot."

Poirot hailed the first taxi we met, and directed the driver to Park Lane.

When we drew up before Halliday's house, he skipped out nimbly, paid the driver, and rang the bell. To the footman who opened the door he made a request in a low voice, and we were immediately taken upstairs. We went up to the top of the house, and were shown into a small neat bedroom.

Poirot's eyes roved round the room and fastened themselves on a small black trunk. He knelt in front of it, scrutinized the labels on it, and took a small twist of wire from his pocket.

"Ask Mr. Halliday if he will be so kind as to mount to me here," he said over his shoulder to the footman.

The man departed, and Poirot gently coaxed the lock of the trunk with a practiced hand. In a few minutes the lock gave, and he raised the lid of the trunk. Swiftly he began rummaging among the clothes it con-

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tained, flinging them out on the floor.

There was a heavy step on the stairs, and Halliday entered the room.

"What in hell are you doing here?" he demanded, staring.

"I was looking, monsieur, for *this*." Poirot withdrew from the trunk a coat and skirt of bright blue, and a small toque of white fox fur.

"What are you doing with my trunk?" I turned to see that the maid, Jane Mason, had entered.

"If you will just shut the door, Hastings. Thank you. Yes, and stand with your back against it. Now, Mr. Halliday, let me introduce you to Gracie Kidd, otherwise Jane Mason, who will shortly rejoin her accomplice, Red Narky, under the kind escort of Inspector Japp."

Poirot waved a deprecating hand. "It was of the most simple!" He helped himself to more caviar.

"It was the maid's insistence on the clothes that her mistress was wearing that first struck me. Why was she so anxious that our attention should be directed to them? I reflected that we had *only the maid's word* for the mysterious man in the carriage at Bristol. As far as the doctor's evidence went, Mrs. Carrington might easily have been murdered *before* reaching Bristol. But if so, then the maid must be an accomplice. And if she were an accomplice, she would not wish this point to rest on her evidence alone. The clothes Mrs. Carrington was wearing were of a striking nature. A maid usually has a good deal of choice as to what her mistress shall wear. Now if, after Bristol, anyone saw a lady in a bright blue coat and skirt, and a fur toque, he would be quite ready to swear he has seen Mrs. Carrington.

"I began to reconstruct. The maid would provide herself with duplicate clothes. She and her accomplice chloroform and stab Mrs. Carrington between London and Bristol, probably taking advantage of a tunnel. Her body is rolled under the seat; and the maid takes her place. At Weston she must make herself noticed. How? In all probability, a newspaper boy will be selected. She will insure his remembering her by giving him a large tip. She also drew his attention to the color of her dress by a remark about one of the magazines. After leaving Weston, she throws the knife out of the window to mark the place where the crime presumably occurred, and changes her clothes, or buttons a long mackintosh over them. At Taunton she leaves the tram and returns to Bristol as soon as possible, where her accomplice has duly left the luggage in the cloakroom. He hands over the ticket and himself returns to London. She waits on the platform, carrying out her rôle, goes to a hotel for the night and returns to town in the morning, exactly as she said.

"When Japp returned from his expedition, he confirmed all my deductions. He also told me that a well-known crook was passing the jewels. I knew that whoever it was would be the exact opposite of the man Jane

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Mason described. When I heard that it was Red Narky, who always worked with Gracie Kidd — well, I knew just where to find her."

"And the Count?"

"The more I thought of it, the more I was convinced that he had nothing to do with it. That gentleman is much too careful of his own skin to risk murder. It would be out of keeping with his character."

"Well, Monsieur Poirot," said Halliday, "I owe you a big debt. And the check I write after lunch won't come near to settling it."

He nodded assuringly.

Poirot smiled modestly, and murmured to me: "The good Japp, he shall get the official credit, all right, but though he has got his Gracie Kidd, I think that I, as the Americans say, have got his goat!"

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Brooklyn Murder — in the human-interest tradition of Black Mask

AMBITIOUS COP

by WILLIAM FAY

JOE DEVLIN WAITED, LISTENING, until the sound was repeated. And it was all right then. He knew it was one of the kids in the big apartment house, dragging a home-made scooter up a long flight of stairs.

Relax, he reminded himself.

He got out of bed and lit a pre-breakfast cigarette. It wasn't easy for him to relax, knowing as much as he did. He was a cop who not only knew too much, but was widely aware that others suspected his knowledge. Close to his bed, on a straight-backed chair, was his wallet, crinkled and worn, containing seven dollars in cash and a detective's shield. Closer still was his .38. It was a Friday in May — 7:30 in the morning — and he had slept less well and for fewer hours than are the supposedly fair allotment of the just.

He gazed from the bedroom window and it was a nice day, with the sun doing a fine job, even on daylight time. It seemed to get up there above the rooftops pretty fast, like a bright balloon, and in another month, or even less, it would be frying the paved streets and the courtyards, and cooking to a parboil the durable citizens, good and bad, who lived in this run-down, crowded section of Brooklyn.

He shaved and dressed, knowing there was a shine across the seat of his second-best pants. But Devlin was not, like Rocco Savarese, or Benny "Boo-Boo" Weiss, or other celebrated gentlemen in the neighborhood, a fancy dresser. Cops don't make enough money for personal grandeur, and, besides that, Devlin didn't care. He was fancy at other things. Too fancy, perhaps. And, likely, too ambitious.

He put his small coffeepot on the stove in the kitchen. He could hear a baby crying somewhere in the building, and the sounds of kids, already in the littered courtyard, playing ball; all the sounds of a city coming alive were there, plus a mother shouting, "Marvin! Marvin! don't *do* it. . . . Marvin, you little stinker, I warned you, Marvin!" and the B.M.T. on its elevated structure, roaring along. This was home to Devlin. He had always lived in the neighborhood, as a boy, and now as a man.

"Hello, Oliver," he said.

He was talking to a cat, named after Oliver Wendell Holmes, which slept, when at home, in the crate in which Devlin's law books, purchased four years before, had arrived. There had been another cat, named Mar-

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shall, but Devlin had given him to a delicatessen man downstairs. Devlin, a big man, and 30 years old, was somewhat afraid of mice.

"*Psssst!*"

He took a can of food from the small refrigerator and spooned some of it onto wax paper for the cat. The coffee began to smell good. He waited impatiently for it to brew. He found a half stale piece of coffee cake in his breadbox. He had no desire this morning for his usual pair of eggs. The phone rang.

He went into the bedroom and picked it up.

"Hello," he said. ". . . Yes? . . . Well, don't worry about me, Inspector, I'm still alive . . . Yes, sir; I know it's my responsibility . . . Leave you out on a limb, sir? . . . Well, I hope not. Not me . . . And I'll be careful, of course, like a horse on eggs. . . . Thanks, sir," and he put the phone down.

It was a quarter past 8 now and in the kitchen Oliver had cleaned the wax paper, which Devlin rolled up and then tossed into the garbage. It was his convenient custom to put the cat out by means of the fire escape that climbed past the kitchen window. Once placed beyond the window, on the fourth floor level, Oliver, an independent creature, could decide itself whether to ascend or descend to the day's events.

Devlin picked up the cat with one hand and with the other tossed the window open wide. Leaning forward, he reached out above a geranium plant that bloomed in a box and was a gift to him from the lady next door. He could hear the kids now, loud and combative over the question of a baseball having landed fair or foul. And he could hear the B.M.T., full-volumed in the out-of-doors. But he heard no more than a whisper from a rifle that spoke from a rooftop, somewhere.

He sprawled back into the kitchen with clumsy haste, keeping below the level of the sill. He swore, and he felt the hot pain in his arm — a burning, really, the slug having grazed the meat of his left bicep.

It bled, but not too freely. In the bathroom he poured peroxide over the wound and was able to stem the bleeding without much trouble. He bound the wound and put on another shirt. There was as yet no incapacity — only the pain in his arm. Back in the kitchen, with a knife and pliers, he was able to extract the small slug from the woodwork — a .22, fired from a high-velocity rifle, at considerable range, and with a silencer's assistance, he was sure. No local boy had done this, Devlin thought. It would be a professional, a torpedo bought and paid for and delivered — an import from Chicago, maybe, or St. Louis. Nice to have around, because nobody knew them, and they could be flown in overnight.

"I'll be careful," he could recall having said to the Inspector.

He put the slug in his pocket, went back into the bedroom, and picked up the telephone.

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Standing on the front steps of the house, before descending to the street, the hatred of his neighbors for Devlin was evident. And especially among the children. It was clearest with them, his offense against them being stark and uncolored by any mitigation of the fact, as they understood it:

Yesterday afternoon he had shot and killed Ruby Jerome, their friend, and, less easily forgiven from their point of view, his own. A guy he grew up with — Ruby. A classy, flashy, open-handed, dollar-dripping benefactor — a wonderful guy like Ruby. Cop or no cop, the neighborhood rule book said, you never ratted on a friend. Not that way, anyhow, with all the law behind you.

Devlin lit a cigarette.

"Hello, Josie," he said to one of the kids.

"Shaddap!" said Josie, who was nine years old, then turned, in tears, and ran. The others did not. They stood there, watching him, not quite daring to taunt, and yet defying him. On the sidewalk before him, and on the street, they had expressed their sentiments in chalk. They were not very nice, as sentiments, and even where mothers had sought to rub out the bolder obscenities, the outlines of the words were still plain enough. Devlin looked at the kids, lined up in the street. It would be very hard to convince them now that he loved them, which he did.

He went down the street a bit and walked into a house where he pushed a first-floor button. There was a smell of cooking throughout the big house and the spoiled dampness of babies, punishingly strong. A girl answered the door.

"Hello, buttercup," Devlin said.

He kissed her and she looked at him impudently. She was a fine girl, blonde and well-made, whose dry eyes not very long before had been damp indeed. But they were all right now; they were interestingly blue, like diluted ink. Her name was Mary Gerski and the Gerskis were several things: Polish, respectable, durable, and almost uniformly beautiful. "Hello, Commissioner," Mary said. Her name for him was a gag, a proud taunt, a slur at what she called his unholy ambition. "They shoot you yet?"

"Only once," he said, and of course she did not believe him. "I want to see Jake — want to see him alone. How is he?"

"If you don't know," Mary said, "you'll find out."

He went through what was once a dining-room door to Dr. Jacob Gerski's office. He saw the diploma, from Columbia Medical, big and triumphant on the wall; then Jake, who, like his sister, was good to look at. He was a big Polish-American with hands that would have served a veterinary well. He saw the solvent people in his office for two dollars, the less solvent for one dollar, the broke for nothing. And like Devlin, for reasons of his own, he had clung to the old neighborhood. He finished examining a child's throat, not looking at

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Devlin. Then he released the kid who, glancing once at Devlin, ran out of the place like a rabbit.

"I guess I've got that certain leprous quality," Devlin said. "The people's choice. And me, with political ambitions."

"What'd you expect — a shower of roses?"

"Take it easy, Jake," Devlin said.

For Jake and Ruby Jerome and himself, as kids, had run the same streets, robbed the same pushcarts, been chased by the same cops, and had once together formed a secret society called, "The Pals-Till-Death Assoc." All that, recalled and indelibly filed away, was in Jake's pale face at the moment. Devlin took off his jacket and his shirt. "I got winged," he said. "Thought you should look at it, maybe cauterize the thing."

"This morning?"

"Puttin' the cat out. This is between you and me, Jake. A guy on a rooftop, tryin' me out as a pigeon."

"Savarese's boys?"

Devlin did not say.

"I've got to report a gun wound," Jake said. "Regulations."

"The hell you do. How many little legalities have you overlooked the last few years? And nothing to Mary."

The big man just looked at the wound and seemed contemptuous of its seriousness. His big hands hurt. "Have fun," said Devlin. He watched Jake's face while his arm was being bandaged.

"Come out of it, Jake. This is me, your old pal."

"I know. That's what I'm thinking." Then pausing, raising his head, he said. "All right, Joe, one thing: when you went up into that apartment after Ruby, were you trigger-happy?"

"No."

"Could you have done anything else?"

"I did what I had to do. If you haven't heard the set-up, you can read it in the papers. Ruby was wanted for murder. He had a gun. He was on the loose. You satisfied?"

"Don't press me, Joe," the big man said. "Don't be aggressive. All I say is that murder wasn't in Ruby's line. Sure, he knew all those hoodlums. After all, I know them, too. We grew up with them. All kinds of grass grew out of the field — me, a doctor, you, a cop with law books, and Ruby? The biggest bookmaker in Brooklyn, and maybe the only honest one. And besides, the dame — well, she wasn't Ruby's kind."

"She made a beautiful corpse."

"I'm not interested."

But a beautiful corpse she had made, nevertheless. A nice, photogenic murder, at 357 Duluth Avenue, the Borough of Brooklyn, the third floor, rear: a beautiful doll named Esther Kovacs, with a dime-sized hole in her head, the bullet entering and departing laterally, and, from the evidence to date, tidily recovered by the assassin. It made Devlin think of the pellet in his pocket which he had picked this morning from the kitchen woodwork.

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Esther Kovacs, age twenty-two, had for a while been a showgirl in one of those big Manhattan flesh displays, and a model at other times, though in the last year she was involved in no occupation of record. Death had occurred at approximately 11:30 P.M. Tuesday, the medical examiner said. No untidy violence was evident. Just the handsome remains, reposeful, with the hole in the head, nicely négligéed and fallen across her own bed, with a moving picture magazine and a box of gumdrops. Indications were that she had seen her murderer, risen from bed, and turned away from him — hence the lateral path of the bullet; then, of course, collapsed back onto the bed.

Robbery had not been a motive. Esther's wardrobe was complete and undisturbed in her closets when the body was discovered a little after midnight. A rather astonishing wardrobe to be the property of a young lady, not known to be employed, and living on the third floor, rear, at 357 Duluth. Items on hangers: one mink coat, assessed at $3000, and one silver fox cape, knee-length, as yet unappraised; other items: shoes and personal effects, high qualitied and abundant, and a bit mystifying to neighbors who knew Esther's father to be a junk dealer, rather strongly addicted to whiskey.

"It seems like Esther went to hell awful fast," Jake Gerski said, "once they put her old man away on the island. I didn't know he was such a chronic drunk."

"The stuff gave him trouble," Devlin said, "but he had his virtues. A pious old guy. I used to see him leave his horse and cart outside of church once in a while and go in for a visit. Of course, he could hardly speak English. You had him for a patient, didn't you, Jake?"

"Well, I treated him a few times. Hangovers and such, and some stuff for his nerves. He was worried about Esther a good deal."

"You speak Polish, don't you, Jake?"

"What about it?"

"Nothing," Devlin said. The feeling between them was strained. Jake's nurse came in. "Have you a moment, doctor?"

Devlin, inside the office, looked around. The files were close to hand. A deep file drawer responded easily. Under the Ks . . . Kirschner . . . Kivkin . . . Kovacs, Elias. He quickly withdrew the card, folded it, and stuck in into his pocket.

Ruby, he thought.

As the man assigned to the neighborhood, Devlin had been on the scene almost immediately after Esther Kovacs's body had been discovered. Ruby Jerome, along with some others, had been subject to a routine examination because he had been seen leaving the house sometime between 11 o'clock and midnight. He admitted knowing Esther Kovacs, and even admitted having visited her on other occasions for reasons that were nobody's business. He also maintained that for the half hour he had been at

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357 Duluth he had been having coffee and cake with Mrs. Shapiro, an old friend of his departed mother's, on the fifth floor, front. Mrs. Shapiro had confirmed this and said that from her window she had even seen him depart along the street. Others, who had been in the apartment house around that time, including Mr. Benny "Boo-Boo" Weiss, had reasons less easy to support.

But Ruby's difficulty had been that between the time he was first questioned and released, and an hour after daylight, Wednesday morning, Homicide men, with their routine thoroughness, had discovered a .25 caliber Italian Barretta — a war souvenir that was known to be Ruby's — three-quarters buried in a first-floor flower bed on the alley side of the house. And daylight had also unearthed in the alley, as though accidently dropped, a notebook of Ruby's containing many of his business transactions, including a notation: E.K., $750. The call was automatic: "Pick up Ruby Jerome and bring him back!"

But Ruby was not easily produced on Wednesday morning, and by 11 o'clock, when Kessler Brothers, Furriers, 22nd Street, Manhattan, produced copies of bills of sale, made out to Mr. R. Jerome for the cash purchase of one mink coat and a silver fox, Ruby was considered a fugitive. He was discovered in an empty flat at 395 Duluth, about 4 o'clock Wednesday afternoon. Cops were arriving with sirens screaming and the people of the neighborhood, pale-faced, some of them praying, were gathered in the street. The gun fight, upstairs, had blazed for possibly three minutes — a long time, really, a very long time. And then they saw Devlin carrying Ruby down the steps of the house, slung over his shoulder, limp.

"Dead?" the people asked, for this was Ruby Jerome, the neighborhood's mildest, gayest, and most popular citizen.

"Not yet," Devlin had said grimly.

It was two hours later the report came from the hospital: Ruby Jerome was dead.

Jake Gerski came back into his office and looked at Devlin. "You know, if I were you, mister, I would get out of this neighborhood fast. Someone'll knock you off for sure. Savarese's boys, most likely. They idolized Ruby, most of them, in their brute, dumb fashion. Bad people liked Ruby even more than the good ones did."

"That so?"

"And Rocco would like you knocked off for personal reasons, wouldn't he?"

"For reasons not sentimental, anyhow," Devlin said.

"How much have you got on Rocco?"

"My business, Jake."

"Your business and your funeral, both. Why don't you go see Healy at your political club. You're his pride and joy and he can probably get you transferred out of the district. You've polished apples enough for Healy, haven't you?"

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Devlin didn't say. But when you are ambitious you have to polish some apples — at least, in the little things. Going to Fordham Law School, for instance, several nights a week, it was convenient to have somebody pull the strings that would keep you, for the most part, working days.

"I'll see you later, Jake."

"Just one thing more, Joe: do you think Ruby murdered Esther Kovacs?"

"No," said Devlin, "I don't."

He went out into the bright street, not stopping to say goodbye to Mary Gerski. Love was an item Devlin did not carry around with him very lightly. He loved people and things a lot more than he was ever capable of demonstrating to the objects of his love.

The kids, meanwhile, had been decorating the sidewalk in front of the Gerskis' with their chalk. He heard the crash of glass but did not see the rock one of them hurled through the plateglass window of The Boys Club down the street. He had been a founder of The Boys Club, hoping to keep them off the streets and out of troubles he and Ruby and Jake had known as kids.

They only hated him now. He walked down the street and some of Rocco Savarese's boys drove past in an open car. They drove past him slowly, holding their noses, demonstrating that people can make a holiday and a cause of hate as easily, more easily even, than they can join together in praise. Not only the kids and the good people of the neighborhood, but Rocco's hoodlums, too; murderers, punks, and thieves themselves, they could respond to a sentimental twisting of their odd amorality whereby the knocking off of a cop — who was also, in their eyes, a rat — was a public service to which a remarkable variety of people would respond with bland "amens." And on the curbstone, opposite the shattered window of The Boys Club, beholding the damage, stood Rocco Savarese himself, with Benny "Boo-Boo" Weiss. You didn't touch Rocco. No one did. He was a very big man in a very big section of town.

"Hello, Judas," Rocco said.

Devlin punched him square in the mouth.

He had many times climbed the one flight of stairs to the West End Political Club. You had to, really. This was where the legitimate local favors were dispensed: a job in the playground summers, for a worthy and youthful constituent; a speeding ticket fixed, before you were a cop; a basket of food for a lady and her family down the street; a political foothold for a young cop about to become a lawyer. This was the place, of course, and Arthur Healy was the man.

"Siddown, Joe," Healy said. "A warm day?"

"Getting warmer all the time, Arthur."

"You worried?"

"Well, to be honest, yes. Since they

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heard I shot Ruby, everybody looks at me like I'm Jack the Ripper with a bloody skull under my coat. And they just heaved a rock through the front window to show me how much they appreciate The Boys Club I started."

"Not helpful to political aspirations, is it?" Healy said. "I thought you were shrewder, Joe. Why didn't you let somebody else go after Ruby?" Healy was a calm and beautifully tailored man in his forties, and he had always been sympathetic to Devlin's ambitions. "You're a cooked goose in this district for the present, Joe. Why not let me help to get you transferred."

"No, thanks," said Devlin. "Tell me, Arthur, did Savarese know Esther Kovacs very well?"

"Couldn't say, Joe. I knew practically nothing about Esther, except that her old man was a lush I tried to help a few times. And I don't know much more about Rocco Savarese. Maybe, to be honest, I just don't *want* to know. You're a cop and I'm a politician. But let's face it, Joe: you're a *little* cop and I'm a *little* politician. Savarese, though, whether you can stomach it or not, is a big man today. Because — well, if he's not, who's running the rackets? Who's getting the dough? Besides, it's very hard to hang anything on a guy who's got more lawyers than you'll ever meet in school."

"Maybe it's not as hard as you think, Arthur. I've got plenty on Rocco, and soon I'll have more."

"Where? In the morgue?" And when Devlin shrugged, Healy said, "If you're wise you'll get that transfer, Joe."

Devlin left the club. He spent a half hour in a cafeteria with Eddie Lester, the Homicide man they sent out to work with him. He had a Swiss cheese sandwich and a glass of milk and a piece of pie and a few ideas.

He left Eddie Lester in the cafeteria, first borrowing the Homicide man's car. He drove through an annoying amount of traffic to the Canal Street Bridge, then north to 22nd Street and the building where Kessler Brothers, Furriers, were located.

"What's your name?" said Devlin.

"Albert Kessler."

"You sold a mink coat and a silver fox cape to Ruby Jerome for Miss Esther Kovacs."

"Yes, sir."

"You have carbons of the bills of sale?"

"How could I have what the police already got?"

"What was the date of purchase?"

"October 4, 1947."

"You say it too fast, Mr. Kessler. You actually recite it. Suppose I said you were a liar?"

"In the fur business, believe me, everybody is calling everybody some terrible things. But a liar? Me?"

Devlin did not pursue this business with Albert Kessler. He went back to Eddie Lester's car. He got to Welfare Island at 2 o'clock. He was ushered into a ward that listed among those occupying the beds a Mr. Elias Ko-

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vacs. There was a chart on the case: Place of birth, Warsaw, Poland. Age, 69. Occupation, junk dealer, license #3406, etcetera, giving biographical and clinical reports on Elias Kovacs, alcoholic.

He saw a shriveled, sick man, watery-eyed and bald. Not present here was the beard that was once as much a part of Elias Kovacs's general façade as the horse that used to pull his wagon through the crowded Brooklyn streets.

The orderly's name was Hogan.

"You got any Polish orderlies around?" Devlin said. "I'd like a little help in talking to Mr. Kovacs."

"We've got a fellow named Danowski and another named Krywicki," the orderly said. "It won't do you any good, though. The man's vocal cords are completely shot, and how the poor devil's lasted this long, I don't know. The cops tried to question him about his daughter — the dame who was knocked off the other night."

"Well, he couldn't have helped them much, anyhow," Devlin said. "Even if he could talk."

"Why's that?"

"Because I knew Esther Kovacs's father for years, but I never saw this man before in my life."

Devlin found a public phone in one of the corridors.

He got back to his section of Brooklyn a bit ahead of time, the traffic being a lot less obstinate on his return trip. Rocco Savarese's boys still loitered along Duluth Avenue. You could feel the pressure, the whole psychological storm. Devlin picked up Eddie Lester, and Lester took over the driving.

"Well, we got the guy who tried to make you a pigeon," Eddie said. "The .22 was gone, but he had the silencer strapped to his leg."

"Give you trouble?"

"No. He was just one of three strange lugs in the neighborhood who couldn't account for themselves. A St. Louis boy, name of Moreno. Your tip was right, though. He was hangin' around for a better shot at you."

"He talk?"

"Not a peep. We managed identification through telephone tracing. Must of cost the city 30 bucks. What else do you know?"

Devlin was not inclined to say. They drove past the Gerskis' house, where the chalk marks had been scrubbed from the pavement. Mary, no doubt.

"Ever been in love?" he said to Lester.

"You a wise guy?"

"Am I?"

"Well, I've got six kids, and you should try to feed 'em on my pay today. So don't talk of love to me."

An aged but traditional Black Maria passed them on the street. "On time," said Devlin. There were no evident occupants; only the driver was visible, and then the cop on the back step, waving to them.

Lester said, "We're making a collection?"

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"A delivery," Devlin said.

"What the hell is this?" Lester complained. "Homicide's got more right to know the answers than a neighborhood gumshoe. Whatta you wanna be, the Commissioner?"

"No," said Devlin. "I want to be Mayor. I'm a very ambitious fellow, haven't you heard? Stop the car here, will you, Eddie. I want to talk to my political sponsor."

In a few moments he knocked on the door of Arthur Healy's office.

"Come in."

Devlin went in. Healy sat behind his desk, lighting a cigarette. "All right, Joe, what tricks am I supposed to do for you now? What kind of help do you need?"

"This time I need you badly, Arthur. The whole damned thing depends on you. We've got a paddy wagon in the neighborhood and we're going to start loading some of the boys aboard."

"Rocco, you mean?"

"Rocco and five or six others. Things are moving pretty fast."

"A cigarette?" Healy said. "You're a bright boy, Joe. I'm proud of you." 'Well, thanks." He lit the cigarette. "You know something, Arthur? I think I know who killed Esther Kovacs."

"That so? Well, who did?"

"You did."

You could hear the water dripping in a sink. You could see the dust rising in the afternoon sunlight that slanted into the room. Healy blanched, staring at him. Then Healy laughed.

"Don't laugh too loud or too long, Arthur."

"Are you *crazy?*"

"I'm not sure. But I was over on the Island today to see Esther's old man. They told me he never had any visitors, except the cops the other day, and Esther once — about a week ago. In bad shape, wasn't he? Poor fellow, his vocal cords gone, and most of his brain gone, too. A funny thing, but you never mentioned to me that you were the one who had him committed."

"I don't know what you're driving at, Devlin, or whether this is a rib or something. Somebody had to have the poor guy committed. Why do people come around to me for services like that? Because that's what I'm here for, to help."

"Well, it was nice of you, Arthur, to find him a comfortable home. He was so sick and incapable of speaking any language, Polish or English, that he couldn't even say he wasn't Esther's father. Looks like him, though, and you should be congratulated on finding such a suitable stiff. If things had gone on just a few more weeks, he would have died and been conveniently, even legally, buried. He's got a few long term degenerative diseases that don't show on Jake Gerski's files. And the hands, Arthur — soft as a girl's. Couldn't you have found another junk man?

"Don't jump up now, Arthur. Sit still. You were really wrapping up a package, weren't you? You killed old Elias because, whether the guy liked

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whiskey or not, he didn't like you fooling around with his daughter, and he would have blabbed so loud that the whole neighborhood, including your dear wife, would have known it. Your explanation to Esther, of course, was that you had the old boy committed, and she was such a sweet little thing, and so fond of being watched over by her father that she wouldn't have cared if you'd buried him in the backyard. You didn't tell that to Esther, though, and one day, a week ago, she got curious or something and went out to see him on the Island. She knew the answer then, the dear, and your problem was that to keep her mouth shut you would have to buy her all the gumdrops in Macy's and all the minks in Siberia. It was cheaper to kill her, wasn't it, Arthur?"

Healy watched him closely.

"You're a madman, Devlin, but you've got a great imagination."

"I've got all kinds of gifts," said Devlin, "except a mink coat to wear up and down Duluth Avenue. Well, anyhow, Arthur, you shot her neatly through the back of her head and you were even tidy enough to get back the slug. You used a silencer, while her radio was blaring. Fashionable this year, aren't they, Arthur? Even with the guys you import from St. Louis. You did a nice clean job on Esther and chances were you could have got away with it, but you got hungry."

Healy was moving slowly backwards in his chair.

"Don't move, Arthur. A .38 makes even a bigger hole at close range. I said you got hungry. I mean about Ruby Jerome. Ruby happened to be seen at 357 Duluth, and right away you turn from a pro to an amateur. You or one of your boys — they're not really Rocco's boys, Arthur; I've suspected that for some time, and you know I've suspected it — Rocco's a punk, just your first lieutenant. Well, you rifled Ruby's house and got that Barretta and a notebook. By morning they're found in the alley.

"That's where you messed it up, Arthur. Any guy who does as neat a job as was done in Esther's bedroom doesn't get clumsy enough to drop a notebook and bury his gun in a flower bed — no matter *how* scared he is.

"Then those other plants of yours, Arthur. Especially those bills of sale the Kessler Brothers phonied for you in their files. They made a serious mistake. Much as you knew that Ruby was an honest guy, trying to help me straighten out the kids in the neighborhood — much as you hated and feared him for his nerve and his popularity, and wanted to be rid of him — you shouldn't have dated those bills October 4, 1947. Why? Because it just happens that on that day Ruby was at the World Series, at Ebbets Field, with me."

"Who'll believe you, Devlin? Did 'Life Magazine' take a picture of you two bums at the ball game? Prove it. Ruby lost his head and so did you. The guy is dead."

Devlin got up and walked to the

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door of Healy's office, which he opened.

"Ruby," he said. "Make like Lazarus."

Ruby Jerome, a lanky man about 30, walked into Healy's office with the cops.

"A guy can get cramped in that pie-wagon," Ruby said. "Hello, Arthur. Like to make a small bet on the horses? I've got a friend."

"He means," said Devlin, "that he's going to work for a living, but that for old times' sake he will recommend you to an honest bookmaker, because there aren't many left."

Healy's pallor did not become him. It clashed with his expensive necktie.

"Ruby and I put on that gunfight for the neighbors," Devlin said. "A Grade-B movie you fell for, Arthur. We figured that with Ruby officially measured for a pine box, you would get careless enough to build one for yourself. You and Rocco can straighten out the small details with the D.A. Come on, boys."

"You're a cold duck, Joe," Jake Gerski said later. "Ambition's all right, but what about people's feelings? What about a guy like me? 'Ruby is dead,' I hear. You mustn't do things like that any more."

"Mary knew," Devlin said. "That's all I cared about. She put on a good act for you, Jake?"

"Very convincing," Jake Gerski said. "Very funny, you bum."

But it was a fine night over Brooklyn, with a moon above the buildings, and from Jake Gerski's office, looking out, you could see Ruby and Mary, sitting on the front steps, with the kids gathering about them.

"You love her, don't you?" Jake said sympathetically.

"You can't have everything," Devlin said. "I just don't have the guy's charm."

"You'll be the mayor some day, Joe."

"Aw, go bury your head," said Devlin.

He got up and walked outside.

A spot of **Broadway** *Melodrama from* **Black Mask** *Magazine*

CANDID WITNESS

by FRANK GRUBER

I'M WORKING THE ROVING PHOTOGrapher racket on Broadway when this trouble starts. I'm minding my own business, snapping likely looking prospects with the Leica and handing out cards which the snappees can send to the Acme Studios along with a quarter and said Acme Studios will

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send them a swell candid camera shot of themselves. Me, I'm the Acme Studios.

Anyway, the first thing I know there's a helluva racket inside the store in front of which I'm working and these two guys come running out. At their heels is a baldheaded guy who's yelling: "Help! Robbers! Police! Murder!"

So there I am, standing with the Leica in my hands, and these two guys charging down on me. I duck the first one, a mean-looking little duffer with a scarred nose, but his pal right behind him, who looks like a reformed heavyweight wrestler, makes a swipe at me. I go down like a bowling pin.

Naturally I figure it's a stick-up and I also figure it's just as well I make a fade-away. In a minute or two they're going to be looking for witnesses and I don't hanker to be one.

So I do a Houdini and disappear from the Main Stem. The afternoon papers say two guys had stuck up a store on Broadway and got away with $746.58. I go home and stash the Leica.

I'm having a hamburger in Joe's Diner when a couple of guys come into the joint and climb up on stools, one on each side of me. The guy on my right says, "How's the photography racket these days?"

It's the scar-nosed guy who was in the Broadway hold-up. The guy at the left of me is the big bozo who walloped me.

"You're the Acme Studios, ain't you?" the little guy asks.

"Me? Naw, I work for 'em."

"You lie like hell," Scarnose says pleasantly. "Those cards you pass out have *your* address on them. We went back and picked one off the street. We been tailin' you."

The little guy puts his right hand into his coat pocket and I know he hasn't got a ham sandwich in that pocket. "So we'd like to do a bit of business with you," he says. "At your apartment."

When we get into the apartment Scarnose locks the door on the inside and takes a shiny .32 caliber popgun from his coat pocket. "Now," he says, "let's get to business. Where is it?"

"What?" I ask.

The big lug swears. "Smart guy, huh?" He takes a step closer to me, then smacks me on the jaw.

Scarnose points the rod in the general direction of my middle vest button.

"Look," says Scarnose. "We're all wastin' time. You were outside that joint this afternoon when me and Clarence pulled a little job. You snapped a picture of us. We want it."

"You're knocking at the wrong door," I tell him. "I didn't snap no picture of you guys."

Scarnose shakes his head. "I'd like to take your word for it, pal, but I can't. We got a swell alibi to prove we was up in White Plains all day, but how much is it worth if the cops get hold of a snapshot which shows us bargin' out of the Broadway joint? So we can't take no chances. Where's the camera?"

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"In the closet," I tell him, "but it won't do you no good."

Scarnose steps to the closet and brings out the Leica. He fools around with it, gets it open after a while.

"Where's the film?"

"Why, ah, at the developers."

Scarnose's face twists. "You're askin' for it, fella. I know damn well you wouldn't get those films developed until the suckers sent in their dough."

Clarence gives me a very dirty look and takes the camera from Scarnose. "Look," he says, "here's a sample of what I'm going to do to you if you don't come clean."

He drops the camera to the floor and jumps on top of it with his No. 12 gunboats. It don't do it no good.

Something explodes in me when I hear that camera smash to splinters and I give a yell and swarm all over Clarence.

Scarnose gets into the thing with his gun. He wallops me across the face with it and lays open my cheekbone, but I grab the gun out of his mitt and chuck it through the window. And then for five minutes we have it real rough.

They win it and are putting the boots to me when the cops break down the door. Naturally all the neighbors heard the noise of the fight because my apartment is in front and when the .32 comes flying out of the window someone gets the idea of calling the cops.

Most of this I learn the next day after the docs at the hospital have patched me up well enough to be taken down to the police line-up in a wheel chair. The guy from the Broadway joint is there and when I pick out the hoods and identify them after he does, he falls all over me.

"They found the money on them," he yelps, "and I'm going to give you a hundred bucks of it for a reward. And what's more I'm going to pay your hospital bill."

Seeing as how I got two broken ribs, a busted schnozzle, and about a million bruises, that'll be elegant. As for the Leica, well, I think I'll figure out some other racket. There wasn't enough in it anyway, even though my overhead was practically nothing.

Yeah, sure, that's why I had to fight those lugs. They'd never have believed that I didn't actually have any films in the camera. What the hell, there's about a thousand roving photographers in the city these days and it's got so only about one person in twenty will send in their quarters and with such a percentage you can hardly break even on the film. That's why I didn't use any.

Risky? Naw, only about one person in fifty'll actually beef when they don't get their picture after sending me a quarter, and when they do beef I just tell 'em the picture didn't come out so good. And I give them back their quarter!

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PRIZE-WINNING STORY

Elisabeth Sanxay Holding has been writing novels, novelettes, and short stories for more than 30 years. She is — and no disrespect is intended, only the deepest and sincerest of compliments — one of the "old pros" of the game. Her work has appeared in nearly every major magazine in the country, and her books have been translated all over the world. Here is one of her newest stories — a light-hearted satire-and-spoof which combines romance with ratiocination and which reveals Miss Holding at her amusing best. There is "glitter" in this story — just as the title promises.

GLITTER OF DIAMONDS

by ELISABETH SANXAY HOLDING

IT WAS RAINING, AND BLOWING HALF a gale that autumn afternoon, and Lady Beryl was very restless. A tall, gaunt woman with wild red hair carelessly pinned up, wearing a gray wool skirt and a most incongruous green nylon blouse with crooked shoulder-pads and many ruffles, she paced up and down the long living-room of the house in Connecticut, lent her for the summer by one of her many American friends.

"Miss my exercise," she said. "If I could get out, even for a while. . . ."

"But, Madame, this weather . . .!" protested Mademoiselle Gervaise d'Arville.

"Call this weather?" said Lady Beryl. "Not me. No. What's keeping me in is that nephew of mine, Philip Phipps. He *said* he'd be here at 4."

"Madame has a nephew?" asked Gervaise, with polite interest.

"Shovels full of 'em," said Lady Beryl. "Nieces, too. You accumulate 'em, you know, when you've been married three times, like me."

"Ah. One sees that," Gervaise agreed. "Shall I then find on the radio something of interest, Madame, to pass the time?"

"No, thanks. No, *thanks!*" said Lady Beryl.

What the poor gal wants, she thought, is one of those news broadcasts. And then she'll want a little talk about Conditions, all over the place, and how damn-awful everything is. No, *thanks!*

"You are agitated, Madame. A cup of tea, perhaps —?"

Lady Beryl shook her head vigorously.

Some three months ago, she had had a letter from her brother, Sir Horace Lumms-Baggington, now in the British Embassy in Washington, in a post so confidential that even he

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himself had little, if any, idea what it was. There's this Mlle. Gervaise d'Arville, he had written. Very nice girl. Twenty-four. Very well-educated, nice figure, nice eyes, all that. They assigned her to me, to handle my French correspondence, and the trouble is, I haven't any, never did have. Girl's one of the conscientious kind, getting a neurosis, or one of those things, because there's nothing for her to do here. Fiddles around all day, trying to be useful, tidies my desk, and all that, and really it's getting on my nerves. Take her on as a companion for a while, will you, and I'll pay her salary.

Lady Beryl had answered at once. During her frequent visits to the States she had picked up many American expressions, which she used with relish and raciness. I want a companion, she had written to Sir Horace, just like I want a hole in the head.

But then, being by nature very generous, and unfailingly optimistic, she had torn up her letter and had sent Sir Horace a telegram. SHOOT GIRL ALONG. WILL PROVIDE.

She had definite ideas as to what was the best way to provide for any personable young woman, and as soon as she had seen Gervaise she had started a campaign. Sir Horace was right; she was a very good-looking girl, nice figure, fine dark eyes, eager, pretty face. Lady Beryl gave parties for her, she took her to parties, to the Country Club, to the Art Center, even to cocktail parties in New York.

In vain. The girl did not know how to dance, and did not wish to learn. She did not play bridge, or canasta. And, what was far more serious, she showed no interest whatever in any of the young men she met. She would, at any sort of gathering, unfailingly ferret out some elderly professor, or some gloomy middle-aged man with a wife and children, with whom she could engage in serious conversation about Conditions — always with a capital C — which they found equally alarming in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the United States.

"My dear girl," Lady Beryl had said to her, "take it easy. Relax. Enjoy yourself."

"Madame," Gervaise always answered, "in the world of today, how is that possible? Ah, no, Madame! For you, for Sir Horace, for the United States, which is now my country by adoption, I wish only to work my fingers to their bones."

This made things very difficult for Lady Beryl; she greatly disliked being obliged to thwart the poor girl. She had long ago learned that Americans believed all English people craved cups of tea at all hours, but Gervaise had superimposed upon this belief her own French theory of tea. It was, according to Gervaise, a medicine, a panacea. It was, she was sure, a tonic for the nerves, for the digestion, and a cure for insomnia. But, my dear, Lady Beryl assured her, I haven't any nerves, or digestion, or insomnia, and I don't *like* tea!

Still less did she like it when, if she was taking an afternoon nap, sitting

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in front of the fire, Gervaise would creep up behind her with a bottle of eau de cologne to rub the stuff on her forehead. Nor could she endure being read to. If you will give me your mending to do, Madame? poor Gervaise would ask. Well, I don't have any, Lady Beryl would answer, regretfully. I mean to say, she would explain, I don't seem to tear my clothes.

"Today," Gervaise would persist, "I make you an omelette *aux fines herbes*, Madame! That you will enjoy."

But the cook had objected so strongly to Gervaise's presence in her kitchen that there was no omelette. No, Lady Beryl had decided, this won't do. It's making a nervous wreck out of the poor girl and myself, too. Got to take steps.

And she had done so.

"Can't think what's delaying Philip," she said, scowling. "He's never late. He got a prize in school for punctuality."

"Your nephew, then, is a schoolboy, Madame?"

"Oh, Lord, no! He's —" Lady Beryl paused. "He's in business," she said, "and doing very well. Fine young chap. I've asked him out here for the weekend, a couple of times, but he refused." She looked at Gervaise obliquely. "Says he has no inclination for any social engagements. Not in times like these."

"Ah!" said Gervaise.

Ah it is, thought Lady Beryl. Well, we'll see. We'll just see. One has one's hopes, *n'est-ce-pas?*

The doorbell rang. "There he is!" cried Lady Beryl, and hastened out into the hall, before Millie, the housemaid, could reach there; she opened the door, and admitted a tall, lean, black-browed young man wearing a raincoat and a beret.

"Philip!" she said, with warmth. "This *is* nice. Long time no see, eh?"

"Yes," he said. "But I don't get out of town much these days."

Millie had arrived now; she took his raincoat and beret, and Lady Beryl led him by the arm into the sitting-room.

"Gervaise," said Lady Beryl, "my nephew, Philip Phipps. Philip, Miss d'Arville, who is visiting me."

"I have the privilege of being employed as companion to Lady Beryl," said Gervaise. She said it courteously and pleasantly, but resolutely. No false pretenses for that girl, no talk of her being here as a guest.

All right, thought Lady Beryl, he'll like that. "Sit down," she said. "Sit down, both of you. What'll it be, Philip? Gin and tonic? Scotch on the rocks?"

"Nothing just now, thanks," said Philip. "I'd like to get the facts first."

"Sherry, perhaps?" said Lady Beryl.

"Not just now, thanks. Aunt Beryl, I stopped at the garage to see your chauffeur —"

"Lay off him!" cried Lady Beryl. "Johnson's a very fine fellow, and I don't want him bothered."

"Apparently," said Philip, "he knew nothing about this loss."

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"No. Why should he? Nothing to do with him."

"Loss?" said Gervaise. "But, Madame. . . ."

"Aunt Beryl," said young Phipps, "am I to understand that the members of your household have not been informed of this loss?"

"No reason why they should be. Now, do take it easy, Philip. Sit down. Cigarettes? Cup of tea? Little chat?"

"It's important not to waste time in these cases," he said, not sitting down and not taking it easy. "The trail grows cold. No. Aunt Beryl, if you'll give me a brief résumé of the facts —"

"I did. Told you on the telephone this morning."

"I'd like a statement in writing. Signed by you."

"Well. . . . Later on, maybe. After tea."

"I'm sorry, but I can't agree to any further delay, Aunt Beryl. If you like, you can make an oral statement, and I'll take it down, for you to sign."

"Nonsense!" said Gervaise. "I can write shorthand, also I can type. For these, I have a diploma. If you permit, I will take down madame's statement."

Philip looked at her for a moment, and she returned his glance steadily.

"Very well," he said. "Thank you."

Gervaise hurried out of the room and returned with a notebook and a pencil; she sat down by the tea table, controlled but tense, all readiness.

"Now, Aunt Beryl," said Philip.

"Same like I told you on the telephone," said Lady Beryl. "Last Sunday, it was. Gervaise and I went to the Country Club, and Downy drove us. Cook had the afternoon off — we gave her a lift to her bus stop. Millie, the housemaid, had two friends here, all of 'em in the little sitting-room they have. She had the radio on — and how! She always likes it loud enough to blast your ears off. Then, when Gervaise and I got back, the things were gone."

"Madame! But, if you please. . . . What things?" cried Gervaise.

"Oh, some — trinkets, you might say," Lady Beryl answered.

"You said over the telephone that there was a diamond ring missing, and a diamond clip," said Philip.

"Diamonds!" said Gervaise, almost in a whisper.

"In your insurance policy," Philip went on, "these two items are valued at nine thousand dollars."

"Nine thousand!" murmured Gervaise.

"You reported that these items are missing," continued Philip. "From where? That is, where do you usually keep articles of such value?"

"Oh. . . . Little boxes," said Lady Beryl.

"Where are those little boxes?"

"Oh, here and there. Bureau drawers, desk drawers, and so on."

"You understand, Aunt Beryl, that it is necessary to establish the fact that you took reasonable precautions against theft —"

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"Certainly!" said Lady Beryl, in a tone of hearty agreement. "But the thing is, this tramp got in. This prowler."

"Have you any proof that an intruder entered the house?"

"Certainly," she said, again. "Saw his footprints, muddy tracks on the stairs, in my room."

"Muddy?"

"Muddy," Lady Beryl insisted.

"The weather on Sunday was cold and dry. How do you account for muddy footprints on that day?"

"Might have waded across a brook," said Lady Beryl.

"Who else saw those footprints, Aunt Beryl?"

"Dunno."

"You didn't call anyone's attention to them?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Didn't want to make anyone nervous," Lady Beryl explained. "House full of women, y'know."

"Have the floors of your rooms and the stairs been swept since you saw these —" he paused — "these muddy footprints?"

"Lord, yes! They're swept every day."

"By whom?"

"Millie. Housemaid, y'know."

"Did she make any comment —?"

"No. They'd be dried up by this morning."

"You told me that you saw the ring and the clip just before you went out on Sunday. Where were they then?"

"In a box."

"Did you lock the box?"

"Well, no. I don't believe in locking things," said Lady Beryl. "You lose the key, and then where are you?"

"You were in the habit of leaving this box unlocked?"

"Of course! In fact, it *couldn't* be locked. Candy box, y'know. Holly wreaths on it, little angels, and so on. Very pretty. Your cousin Sam gave it to me last Christmas."

"This box, then, was accessible to anyone in your household?"

"I told you it was a *prowler*," said Lady Beryl. "Now let's have a spot of tea, or something."

"Aunt Beryl," said Philip, "I wonder if you realize the serious nature of the report you made —"

"Certainly I do. Thing to do is, to track down this prowler and get the stuff back. They'll be in a pawnshop somewhere, of course. I hear you're very good at this sort of thing, Philip. Irma tells me you're as good as a detective. A dick," she amended, with her great fondness for the American localism. "A private eye. A shamus. But no, that's a cop, isn't it?"

"When a theft is reported to us," said Philip, "we make a prompt and thorough investigation. The first step —" He paused. "The first step is, to satisfy ourselves beyond any reasonable doubt, that a theft has actually been committed."

"What else could it be?"

"In a great many instances," said Philip, "articles are reported as stolen

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which have simply been mislaid. And . . ." — another of his pauses — "the Griffin Mutual Insurance Company is very insistent upon obtaining evidence that *every reasonable* precaution had been taken against theft."

"All right, all right, all right!" exclaimed Lady Beryl. "That's just what *you're* here for, my boy. Stay two or three days, a week, investigate. Track down this prowler."

Philip turned to Gervaise.

"Miss d'Arville," he said, "have you, at any time, seen this box described by Lady Beryl?"

"I have, Mr. Phipps."

"Were you aware of the contents of this box?"

"In detail, no, Mr. Phipps. But I have seen it, and it glitters, as if diamonds. . . ."

Millie now entered the room, carrying a large and heavy tray, on which were a tea service, plates of sandwiches, bowls of salted nuts and potato chips, a bowl of ice cubes, a decanter, and glasses.

"Ah," said Lady Beryl, "now we can relax. Be cheerful. . . ."

"Just a moment, please!" said Philip, turning to Millie. "Your name, please. Your full name. . . ."

"It's Mildred, sir. Mildred Bauer."

"Thank you. Miss Bauer, did you sweep the stairs and the floor of Lady Beryl's bedroom this morning?"

"Yes, I did!" the girl answered, alarmed and indignant. "I always do."

"Did you notice anything unusual on these floors?"

"No, sir, I didn't. And if it's anything that's lost, or was dropped, like a fancy pin, or anything, I'd of brought it straight to Lady Beryl, like I always do."

"Did you notice anything in the nature of footprints?"

"Footprints? You mean — like footprints?"

"Footprints."

"No, I didn't."

"Miss Bauer, were you here in this house yesterday afternoon, while Lady Beryl and Miss d'Arville were absent?"

"Yes, I was. And my girl friend, Edna, she was here too, and her boy friend, and they can tell you themselves that I wasn't out of their sight a minute, and if there's anything funny, or missing, what I want to know is, why wasn't I told before the police was called in?"

"I'm not a policeman," said Philip, briefly. "I'm here to make inquiries with regard to the reported loss of a diamond pin and clip."

"Diamonds!" said Millie, in much the same tone Gervaise had used.

"Miss Bauer, in your opinion, would it have been possible for any outsider to have entered this house yesterday afternoon without your knowledge?"

"Well . . ." she said, slowly, "I'd say no — with the front door latched, and we could see the back door through the kitchen, and the side door's always bolted on the inside. Only, you see in the movies how easy those crooks can get into houses,

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and we had the radio on, and maybe we wouldn't have heard footsteps, or — that thing they open locks with — electric grill."

"Miss Bauer," said Philip, "will you give me the names and addresses of the friends who were with you yesterday?"

"Yes, I *will*," she said, and began to cry.

"Philip, let her alone!" said Lady Beryl. "She's a nice girl and —"

"He can go and *see* my friends . . ." said Millie. "If he's got suspicions, he can go and ask anybody that knows me. And he can go right upstairs now and ramsack my room."

"That's scarcely within my province," said Philip.

"Well, I don't know what's your providence, and what isn't," said Millie. "But if anyone's got suspicions of me, I got a right to have my room ramsacked."

"Nonsense!" said Lady Beryl. "Nobody suspects you, Millie."

"Lady Beryl," said Gervaise, "Mr. Phipps. Excuse me, please, if I offer a suggestion. But I have read much about such investigations, and I think it is in all cases customary to begin with a process of elimination of the members of the household. No?"

"Quite right," said Philip. "You are quite right."

"Then I ask you to search my room also, Mr. Phipps."

"No!" said Lady Beryl. "I won't have it!"

"Madame!" said Gervaise, with utmost earnestness. "Believe me, this search would be of advantage not only to yourself but to all of your household. It would help to establish the fact that these diamonds have not been mislaid, but that they have been removed from the premises."

"No!" repeated Lady Beryl, and then, almost at once: "All right!" she said. "I'll just rip upstairs myself and see."

"But, Madame! But, no! To do that is to spoil all! This company of Griffin might well say — ah! In advance of the search madame has flown up the stairs! She has concealed the diamonds!"

"*I* don't care what they say," said Lady Beryl, peevishly.

"But, Madame! There is your reputation to consider!"

"My reputation can look after itself," said Lady Beryl.

"Madame! I beg you, permit Mr. Phipps to search my room and the room of Millie."

"And there's another domestic, isn't there?" Philip asked.

"There's Mrs. McKenna, the cook," said Millie. "She's right out in the hall, taking it all in."

"If you'll ask her to step in . . ." said Philip.

A form appeared in the doorway, a short, stout woman, almost oval in shape, with high, round shoulders, like a belligerent Mrs. Humpty Dumpty.

"McKenna is the name," she said, "and the President himself could not set foot in my room. Let you lay a hand on me, and I'll go to law. For

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I've my rights as well as anyone, high or low."

"Mrs. McKenna!" said Gervaise. "Believe me, it is to your own advantage —"

"Is it so?" asked Mrs. McKenna, with irony. "I'll be up the stairs now, and I'll turn the key in the lock of my door and I will drop it in the pocket of my apron. And let anyone lay a hand on me —"

"Nobody's going to," said Lady Beryl. "Philip, just drop the whole thing."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't do," said Philip. "You've reported a loss and the company is obliged to investigate —"

"Well, I take it back," said Lady Beryl. "Cancel the report. The things will probably turn up, sooner or later, anyhow."

"Have you any reason for assuming that?" Philip asked.

"Because they do," said Lady Beryl. "There was this elderly clergyman, for example. Lost some very valuable book — thousand years old — something of the sort. And it turned up, buried at the foot of an oak tree in his garden. I mean, things like that. Now, just skip it. Drop it."

"Aunt Beryl," said Philip, "I'm obliged to put this bluntly. This attitude on your part will inevitably lead the officers of the Griffin to suspect that you were attempting to present a fraudulent claim."

"Or that madame was attempting to shield another," said Gervaise. "To one who knows the generosity, the kindness of Lady Beryl, that thought comes uppermost. Madame knows, or believes that she knows where these jewels are. And in her bounty of heart, she wishes to protect the thief. Mr. Phipps! Is it not obvious? When madame made her report, she did not know, did not suspect the one who is the thief. But now — all is otherwise. Is it not obvious, Mr. Phipps, that something has occurred — *between the time of the report and the present moment?*"

"Very well put!" said Philip. "Very well reasoned. Very good. Have you ever done any work of this sort, Miss d'Arville? Investigating?"

She smiled a little then, for the first time since his arrival.

"Only in fiction, Mr. Phipps," she said. "I read many stories of detection, and how much I enjoy those which are logical —"

Lady Beryl had quietly opened the door that led into the dining-room and had reached the hall before there was a cry from Mrs. McKenna and an answering cry from Gervaise. She ignored them; she started to run up the steps. But they were after her. As she opened a door on the floor above, Philip laid his hand on her arm.

"Aunt Beryl," he said, "if you know anything, or suspect anything —" there was one of his pauses — "*now is the time to speak.*"

"Says who?" demanded Lady Beryl.

"Mr. Phipps," said Gervaise, "this room which Lady Beryl had flown up to enter is *my* room. I believe that

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something has recently developed which has caused Lady Beryl to suspect me of this theft. And because of her bounty of heart, she has wished to discover the diamonds herself, to conceal them, in order to protect me."

"Criminy!" said Lady Beryl, in dismay. This is going to be hard to laugh off, she thought. They're both so doggone serious and logical and stupid. Dumb, that's what they are. They've just about spoiled the whole show. Just about — but not quite. I started this, and I'll finish it. So off we go, taking all the hurdles, and tantivity, and all that.

"Very good!" she said, and threw open the door, a little harder than she intended; it crashed against the wall. It was a large room, handsomely furnished, and scrupulously neat. Too neat, Lady Beryl thought, but then Philip's like that, too. She crossed the room to a secretary and let down the flap, disclosing a desk in beautiful order, letters arranged in the pigeonholes.

"But, Madame . . .!" said Gervaise.

"A secret drawer," Lady Beryl explained, and began scrabbling at the wooden panel between the rows of pigeonholes. "You turn something, pull something, push something."

"Permit me, Madame," said Gervaise, and reaching past Lady Beryl, she turned something and pushed something, and a little drawer shot out so violently that it left its groove and fell onto the desk, spilling its contents. In the light of the gray day the diamonds glittered blue and white.

Lady Beryl scooped them up. "Very good!" she said. "Now I've found 'em. Nothing's lost. Everything's fine. Your Mutual Griffin can be happy now."

"Aunt Beryl," said Philip, "I must ask for an explanation. I must ask why you made that claim, why you were insistent upon my coming all the way out here —"

"Nope," said Lady Beryl. "Nothing to say. I won't talk."

"Aunt Beryl, I am obliged to make some sort of report to my company. What —?"

"Tell 'em I mislaid the things. And then found 'em again."

"When there was a question of a search being made," said Philip, "you came directly to this desk, to this secret drawer. Am I to assume —?"

"Probably yes," said Lady Beryl. "Anyhow, drop it!"

"Aunt Beryl," he said, severe, but obviously very unhappy. "I've always had a great regard for you. Knowing your father and his reckless disposition, I could have understood your having some temporary financial difficulty. But *this* . . .?"

"Oh, do let me alone?" cried Lady Beryl, desperately. "You're persecuting me!"

"Madame," said Gervaise, "your nephew thinks only of your reputation. Mr. Phipps!" she turned to Philip, and never had she looked so

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handsome, so pale, so proud. "Mr. Phipps, it is I who took these jewels. *I* am the thief!"

"Hooey!" cried Lady Beryl, in a shout of anger and frustration. "That girl's as honest as daylight. She wouldn't steal a fly. No . . . that's not right. A crumb? No — what *is* it that people wouldn't steal? A pin, that's it! *She's* thinking of my 'repute.' I won't have it! *I* took those ding-blasted diamonds myself, and I put 'em there in the desk. And now I've got them back, there's no harm done, and it's nobody's *business* why."

Gervaise approached her, and laid a hand on her sleeve.

"Dear Lady Beryl," she said, "please believe that one understands how it is, in these times, for the members of the aristocracy."

"Who? *Me?*" asked Lady Beryl.

"It is so in all countries, dear Madame," said the earnest girl. "Taxes, confiscations, the loss of privileges, of power, of wealth. It is the beginning of a new order, Madame, a new democracy — the beginning, one hopes, of a better way of life. But the members of the aristocracy, however admirable, however guiltless they may be as individuals, must suffer, must become impoverished."

"But, my dear girl!" Lady Beryl began. Then she caught sight of her nephew's face and she became silent. He was looking at Gervaise — and with what a look! Respectful, admiring — almost human, thought Lady Beryl.

"Yes," Philip said. "Very well put, Miss d'Arville. But ethical values don't change."

"No," Gervaise agreed. "But in times like these, Mr. Phipps. . . ."

"Well, yes . . ." said Philip.

They actually believe they're talking, thought Lady Beryl. I suppose they could go on this way for hours.

"Now," she said, "you two nip downstairs and get your tea. I'm going to lie down."

She gave them what she hoped was a winning smile and moved toward the door, which Philip held open for her. As she started down the corridor, he closed the door, and, swiftly and silently, Lady Beryl returned, to stand outside the room.

"But I still don't understand why she did such a thing," Philip was saying.

"Ah, Mr. Phipps!" Gervaise said. "In these changing times. . . ."

"Well, yes," he admitted. "In any case —" one of his pauses — "I don't regret having come all the way out here, at the beginning of a very busy week. Because it's given me the opportunity of meeting you."

"You're very kind, Mr. Phipps. And now, if we go to our tea, perhaps you will tell me a little about your work of investigation. I shall be *very* much interested."

Lady Beryl hastened off to her own room, and closed the door. Ah! she said to herself, with a long sigh of relief. My "repute" may be a little dented, but it was worth it! Yes. *Ça marche*, okay, okay.

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Q.B.I.: QUEEN'S BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

RACKET DEPT.: *The Gamblers' Club*

by ELLERY QUEEN

ELLERY WAS ADMITTED INTO THE sacred mysteries of The Gamblers' Club one winter morning, when a stainless town car which the slush of 87th Street seemed unable to sully deposited three men on his doorstep. Inspector Queen, who was home that morning working on a confidential report, raised his birdy brows at the size of the car and retired with his papers to the study — not, however, without leaving the door ajar the irreducible minimum for eavesdropping.

The three men introduced themselves as Charles Van Wyne, Cornelius Lewis, and Gorman Fitch. Van Wyne was slender and bluish, Lewis was huge and brown, and Fitch was roly-poly and pink.

The Gamblers' Club, they explained to Ellery, was an association of seventeen retired businessmen with a passion for gambling and the means to indulge in it. In addition to the conventional group games of chance played in the clubrooms, members were pledged to suggest unusual gambling adventures to one another on an individual basis, being expected in this oath-bound obligation to display imagination and ingenuity. Suggestions were made by mail, anonymously, on special letterheads of The Gamblers' Club available to members only.

"Why anonymously?" asked Ellery, fascinated.

"Well, when someone's been hurt," squeaked pink little Mr. Fitch, "we don't want him holding a grudge."

"Of course, we're all reliable characters," murmured Van Wyne, nibbling the head of his stick. "Quite the whole point of the Club."

"But apparently someone's developed an unreliable streak. Is that it?" Ellery asked.

"You tell it, Van Wyne," boomed the large Mr. Lewis.

"Lewis dropped in on me this morning," said Van Wyne abruptly, "to ask if I happened to be a party to a certain individual Club gamble he'd been enjoying, and when we compared notes we found we were both in the same thing. The two of us wondered if anyone else was in it and, since Mr. Fitch lives in my neighborhood, we dropped in on him and, sure enough, he was involved, too.

"Exactly three weeks ago each of us received a long envelope in the morning mail, with a typewritten message on Club stationery — quite in order — giving us a tip on the market. The

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stock suggested is unstable as the deuce — way up one day and way down the next — making it a real gamble, so each of us bought. It took a big jump, and we cleaned up. Two weeks ago this morning we each received a second letter proposing the purchase of another stock, equally jittery. Again we made a lot of money.

"And just one week ago today —"

"The same thing," rumbled Cornelius Lewis impatiently.

"You want to know," asked Ellery, "how he does it?"

"Oh, we know how he does it," said pudgy Mr. Fitch testily. "He's got inside information, of course. It's not that —"

"Then it's the letter you all received this morning."

The big ex-banker glowered. "How the devil did you know we got letters today?"

"Let's call him Mr. X," said Ellery, getting into the spirit of the thing. "Mr. X's first letter came three weeks ago today, his second two weeks ago today, his third one week ago today — so it was a pretty good bet, Mr. Lewis, that a fourth came today. What's disturbing you about it, gentlemen?"

Charles Van Wyne produced a long envelope. "Read it, Mr. Queen."

The envelope was of fine quality. It had no imprint or return address. Van Wyne's name and address were typewritten, and from the postmark it had been mailed the previous night.

Ellery removed from it a sheet of weighty stationery with a tony THE GAMBLERS' CLUB at the top in gold engraving:

"Dear Fellow-Member:

How did you like my three market tips? Now something new has come up and it looks like the best yet. Secrecy is important, though, and I have to handle it personally or it's all off. If you'll gamble $25,000 on a hot chance to double it in seven days, no questions asked, leave the cash at the foot of Dominicus Pike's grave in Trinity churchyard tomorrow at 3:30 A.M. on the button. No prying, or you'll spoil the deal."

There was no signature.

"Now I've told Lewis," said Van Wyne, "that this is a sporting gamble. The man's proved himself. I'm for it."

"I don't say I'm not," growled Cornelius Lewis. "The only thing is —"

"Isn't that why we're here?" demanded Gorman Fitch with a sniff. "What do you think, Queen? This sound on the level to you?"

"Fitch, you're impugning the integrity of a fellow-member," said Van Wyne coldly.

"I'm just asking a question!"

"It's possible, Van Wyne, isn't it?" grumbled Lewis. "And if somebody's turned crooked, that's the end of the Club, and you know it. What's your opinion, Queen?"

"Sounds good to me," murmured Ellery. "But I'd want to dig a bit

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before committing myself. Did either of you other gentlemen bring your letters of this morning with you?"

"Left mine home," stated Lewis.

"They're practically identical with Van Wyne's," objected Fitch.

"I'd like to see them, nevertheless, envelope and all. Suppose you send them right over to me by messenger. I'll phone the three of you before noon."

The moment the front door had closed, the study door opened; and there was Inspector Queen, incredulous.

"Did I hear right?" snapped Ellery's father. "Did you say to those three this sounds 'good' to you? Good for what, laughs?"

"The trouble with you," said Ellery in a pained way, "is that you've got no gambling blood. Why not wait for developments?"

Emerging from the study again just before noon, Inspector Queen found his celebrated son examining two envelopes and their contents. Cornelius Lewis's envelope, postmarked the night before, was exactly like the one Charles Van Wyne had received, and the wording on the Club letterhead was the same except that where Van Wyne's time for depositing the $25,000 at the Trinity Church grave had been 3:30 A.M., Lewis's was to be 3:45 A.M. The small plain envelope Gorman Fitch had received, also postmarked the previous night, contained the same message on Club stationery except that Fitch was to deposit his package of cash at 4:00 A.M.

"I suppose," said the Inspector, "you're going to recommend that your three clients follow these instructions to the letter?"

"Sure thing," said Ellery cheerfully; and he telephoned his approval to Van Wyne, Lewis, and Fitch in turn.

"Are you out of your mind, Ellery?" howled Inspector Queen as Ellery hung up for the third time. "The only sure thing in this racket is that three suckers are going to be taken for twenty-five thousand lollypops!"

"Racket?" murmured the son.

The old gentleman controlled himself. "Look. This smoothie operates on a group of—"

"Mr. X? And what do you mean by 'group'? Specify."

"Seventeen! One of the seventeen Club members has gone sour. Maybe he's broke. He picks a stock that's always acting like a pogo stick and he writes half the members to play this stock to go up, the other half to play it to go down. Whichever way the stock moves, half the members lose, *but the other half win*, and he's a genius.

"Step two: He ignores the losers in the first operation and sends his second tip only to the winners—"

"Figures," pleaded Ellery. "Exactly how many would receive the second tip?"

"Half the original sixteen! Eight, the eight first winners. Now he tips

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half these eight to play the stock up, the other half to play it down. Again, half have to win —"

"Number, please," said Ellery.

"Can't you do kindergarten arithmetic? Half of eight is four! Now he's got four two-time winners. He picks another kangaroo stock, sends the third letter, this time telling half the four to play the stock up, the other half to play it down. So now he's got his three-times-winning chumps primed and he's ready to spring the big one. He sends his fourth letter —"

"To how many?" inquired Ellery.

"To the two remaining winners!"

"That's what it should boil down to, all right," mourned Ellery. "The only thing is, it doesn't. *We've got three.*"

Slowly, the Inspector sat down.

"An extra man," said Ellery. "Question: Who is he, and how could he possibly defy the laws of mathematics? Answer: He can't, so he's the con man himself, our friend Mr. X, not one of the suckers at all."

"Van Wyne, Lewis, or Fitch. One of them's the bunco . . ."

"I'm afraid so. Whichever one of the three he is, this morning, to his annoyance, he found himself in a consultation with his two victims. The letters setting up the graveyard payoff had been mailed last night and were already delivered, so he couldn't do anything about *them*. He could only pretend he'd been a three-times winner, too! If I warned his innocents to lay off, Mr. X would simply fail to show up tonight at Trinity. But if I didn't seem suspicious or a threat, he'd go through with his scheme. Does it figure?"

"Like Einstein," chortled the Inspector; and he hurried downtown to Police Headquarters to make certain arrangements about a churchyard and the grave of one Dominicus Pike.

Ghosts walked about Broadway and Wall Street that night, but by 1:00 A.M. they had subsided behind various illustrious headstones in the churchyard, and the area grew quiet.

Ellery insisted that his father share George Washington's old pew in the chapel with him, murmuring something about the long wintry wait and the Father of Truth.

But at 3:15 the Queens were skulking behind one of Mother Trinity's skirts. At 3:30 A.M. on the nose the slender shadow of Charles Van Wyne fell eagerly across the grave of Dominicus Pike.

It deposited something on the frozen ground and slithered away.

At 3:45 the black hulk of Cornelius Lewis appeared, something dropped behind the headstone, and the black hulk melted away.

At the last stroke of 4:00 A.M. the dumpy blur that was Gorman Fitch repeated the process, and then he, too, disappeared into the darkness.

"Whichever he is, he's taking no chances," chattered Inspector Queen. "If anything went wrong, he'd be one of the suckers depositing his twenty-five grand. Now he'll wait a while.

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Then he'll sneak back to pick up the cash. I wonder which one it'll turn out to be."

"Why, Dad," said Ellery in an amazed undertone as he turned to his parent, "do you mean to say you don't *know*?"

"No, I don't," whispered the Inspector malevolently. "And don't tell me you do!" he added.

Ellery sighed. "Of course I do . . . X certainly didn't send any letters to himself — he didn't expect to have to enter the problem as a 'victim' at all. When accident forced him into it yesterday morning, he was in a jam. Yes, he could lie to the other two and *say* he had also received the fourth letter, but I asked him to produce it — along with the envelope. To look genuine, the envelope he gave me had to have the same postmark as the other two — the postmark of the night before! But that was impossible — it was now the morning after, and our conspirator found himself faced with a bit of a problem.

"So X did the best he could. He looked through his legitimate morning mail and found a plain envelope addressed to him, with no return address, which bore the correct postmark of the previous night; and he sent that envelope along to me with the note he had hastily typed as an enclosure. The only trouble was, the envelope was *of a different size* from the ones he'd been sending his victims. He hoped, I suppose, that I wouldn't notice the discrepancy in the sizes."

"Van Wyne's envelope was *long* . . ." the Inspector said.

"And Lewis's was identical with Van Wyne's. But the third envelope," said Ellery, "was a *small* envelope, and since that was the one sent over to me by —"

A shout profaned the churchyard, lights popped, and in their beams a figure was caught kneeling over three bundles on the grave like a boy in a melon patch. It was the pudgy little figure of Gorman Fitch.

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THE RETURN OF RAFFLES

Will any of us ever really forget the first great "gentleman crook" of our earlier reading? — the one and only Raffles, that credible cracksman and crackajack cricketer. Born in book form in 1899, the original exploits live on — at least, in reverent nostalgia. The first adventures appeared under the now-famous title of THE AMATEUR CRACKSMAN *(1899), and only two more volumes of short stories followed —* THE BLACK MASK *(1901), published in the United States as* RAFFLES: FURTHER ADVENTURES OF THE AMATEUR CRACKSMAN, *and* A THIEF IN THE NIGHT *(1905); there was also a single Raffles novel which, strangely enough just because it was a novel, has almost passed into biblivion — it was called* MR. JUSTICE RAFFLES *(1909).*

And that was all, and Raffles seemed to die when the "gay, glittering world of Victorian London" became only a memory. Then in 1921 Raffles's creator, E. W. Hornung, passed on, and the curtain seemed to fall forever on the cavalier career of the dashing A. J.

But it was not to be: the legend came to life. In the 1930s Barry Perowne, with the permission of the Executors of the E. W. Hornung Estate, revived the gentleman crook, this time in modern dress and in modern London. Indeed, Raffles came to life almost in the flesh, when David Niven (and could there have been a better choice?) portrayed him in motion pictures. But for all his new gayety and nonchalance and devil-may-care bravado, somehow it was not the same — Raffles was not the same romantic rogue we once knew.

So, one day in 1951, while we were talking with Barry Perowne himself in our study — in the very shadow of the Raffles first editions — we tentatively suggested: Why not bring back the old Raffles, the original Raffles, complete with hansom cabs, gaslit streets, and that very same gold cigarette case full of Sullivans?

Mr. Perowne hesitated — it was truly a formidable challenge; but he had already written nearly a million words about the modern Raffles, and deep in his heart he had that old love for the original turn-of-the-century character. And so it was done, and in the February 1952 issue of EQMM we gave you "A Costume Piece," the first genuine return of Raffles.

Now Mr. Perowne, again with the approval of the Hornung Estate, has written a new series of new Raffles stories, and we offer you the first of this

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series in the tale of an ingenious bank robbery in which Raffles chose as his confederates the indispensable Bunny and the indescribable Egyptian Princess Amen. At least four more new adventures of Raffles will be coming your way, and all of them are imbued, in their tone and texture, with authentic fin-de-siècle flavor, with the charm and spirit of that bygone era, and, yes, with that curious aura of decadence which hangs over most tales of Victorian London, despite the captivating blend of romance and sentiment that is the very core of chivalry, even in the field of crime. And one more thing, not to be minimized: we think you will find the new adventures of Raffles even cleverer than the old memoirs, and thus more suited to contemporary 'tec taste.

RAFFLES AND THE PRINCESS AMEN

by BARRY PEROWNE

IN THE LAVENDER TWILIGHT OF A summer evening a hansom clip-clopped westward through the streets of London, carrying Raffles and myself to a dinner engagement. Not for some months had any felonious exploit replenished our joint exchequer, and we were discussing our financial situation.

"Something," A. J. Raffles declared, "must be done about it, Bunny. There's no more delightful life than that of eligible bachelors with a penchant for cricket that makes them welcome guests at the best country houses. But keeping one's end up comes expensive."

He took his cigarette case from his breast-pocket. We were in evening dress. The case he proffered me was gold. The cigarettes we lighted were his favourite Sullivans. Flipping the spent match at the jogging rump of the horse, he inhaled thoughtfully and looked at the buildings we were passing.

"A prosperous part of London," he remarked. "It symbolizes these climactic years of a great century and a great Queen. I hadn't realized before that there were quite so many banks in Kensington. Have you an account at any of them, Bunny?"

I had accounts, in various names, at half a dozen banks, as he had himself. It was a matter of common prudence, for men who at any moment might find it advisable to adopt some alternative identity.

"Just ahead," I replied, "there's a branch of the County & Continental. An individual called Lesage has been on their books for the past four years. They know him as a man of slight build, with a scholarly stoop, a thin, tanned face, rimless spectacles, and

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prematurely white hair. I may say that the spectacles are of plain glass, the hair-whitener comes out of a bottle, and the stoop is histrionic. The bank has no English address for him, as he's an Egyptologist and is abroad a good deal, delving beside the Nile. He appears at the bank, to sweeten his account with a small deposit, only on rare occasions."

"Too rare for his own liking, perhaps?" said Raffles, with a chuckle. "But a bright idea, Bunny — an Egyptologist. What made you hit on that?"

"Partly the fact that Egyptology is much in the fashion," I explained, "and partly the hope that the number of museums in this neighbourhood would furnish — by inference — a background to the character. In point of fact, the manager, one Purkiss, long ago deduced that Lesage must be a member of field expeditions sent out by one or another of the museums. Purkiss seems to think the occupation a romantic one, and the Egyptologist — though his balance is usually trifling — is one of the bank's favourite customers." I nodded at a building which the hansom was now passing. "That's the place."

Raffles glanced at it. From the windows, with their lower panes of frosted glass protected by grilles of spiked iron, the white light of gas globes shone out into the purple dusk.

"A snug little bank," said Raffles approvingly. "Working late, aren't they?"

"Getting out the quarterly balances, no doubt," I said. "Worse luck, the Egyptologist's will show a credit of a laughable eleven pounds — if that. So we might as well stop talking about banks. After all, you've told me many a time that, with bank vaults what they are nowadays, there isn't a cracksman in England who could get into one."

"Quite so," said Raffles.

He drew meditatively at his cigarette as our hansom swung to the left into the quiet square where we were to dine at the home of a friend.

Dick Farr was waiting on the steps of his house to greet us as our hansom jingled to a standstill. He was a big, sandy-haired chap of about twenty-two, with a blunt face and rather solemn blue eyes. He and his elder brother Frank had been at school with us. Both good cricketers, they were also, as is often the case with the offspring of a profligate father, serious-minded and idealistic fellows.

Frank, in fact, had become a missionary and was out in West Africa. As for Dick, he had a passion for medicine, and that he should have been eating his heart out on a high stool in a Threadneedle Street office, instead of studying to qualify as a doctor, was the fault of his father.

Old Ferdinand Farr, in his days as a country squire, had been a famous steeplechase rider, a renowned port drinker, and a notorious gambler. Horses, wine, and cards had brought him so near to ruin that he was no longer a country squire, but lived, mortgaged to his purple nose and

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bushy eyebrows, in this Kensington square. About the only relic of past glory which remained to him was a jewelled scimitar, of great historic and intrinsic value — often pictured in magazines, *By courtesy of F. Farr, Esq.* — that dated from the days of an ancestor who had crusaded with Richard the Lion-Hearted.

"The guv'nor's superstitious about it," Dick had once told us. "He thinks that if it went out of the family, after all these centuries, by any act of his, he'd be struck dead or something. A typical gambler's quirk. But for that, he'd sell it like a shot and invest the proceeds in Josie and Frank — and my medical studies, perhaps. Such a pity, really. We hate to see him torture himself, about his past follies, just because of us. But he *will* do it, and that's why he drinks as he does."

There was an incident at dinner tonight which started old Ferdy drinking. It was something his daughter said — or, rather, nearly said. Josephine was blonde and twenty, with very clear blue eyes, and with great beauty and character in her face. Her elder brother Frank, the missionary out in West Africa, was her hero. She glowed when she spoke of him.

"Frank's doing wonderful things. I'd give anything in the world to be able to go out there and work with him. Women *are* doing things like that nowadays," she said defensively, turning to her mother. "And Frank has all kinds of plans I could help him in, if only he could get them started. It's just a question of —"

She bit her lip suddenly. But the unspoken word — "money" — hung horribly in the air; and, blushing, she cast a covert, remorseful glance at her father. I saw the stricken look on the old man's purple face. Then Raffles, in his easy way, changed the subject.

The damage was done, however, and old Ferdy, when the ladies had withdrawn, was pretty hard on the port — merciless, in fact. To wean him away from it before he sank under the table, Raffles asked if we might see the celebrated scimitar.

"We've only seen it in pictures," he said.

If he hoped old Ferdy would take us to it, he was disappointed.

"Damned thing," the old man muttered. "I keep it at the bank — only place for the damned thing. Pass the port, Dick."

But Dick froze onto the decanter. "Mother's expecting us in the drawing-room for coffee. Come on, guv'nor."

"Damned women," said old Ferdy.

He was well away. We had not been long in the drawing-room before he must needs want to play cards — and poker, to boot. The ladies gave him up as a bad job, and, with resigned expressions, went off to bed. Raffles, closing the door on them, gave me a glance which I took to mean that we must be easy on the old reprobate. I discarded, accordingly, the constituents of one or two promising hands. Then it dawned on me that Raffles, sitting there — an impeccable figure with his tanned, inscrutable,

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handsome face, his dark, crisp hair — opposite the increasingly towselled and gruntulous ex-squire, was playing a razor-edged game. The chip values, at Dick's insistence, had been set low. Nevertheless, when it came to squaring up, Raffles had over ten pounds to come from Ferdy. The old man fished a rather meagre handful of assorted gold and silver from his pocket.

"Please don't run yourself short of ready," said Raffles, lighting a Sullivan. "A cheque'll do just as well, Mr. Farr."

Dick came out to see us off.

"A pleasant evening, Dick," said Raffles. "Sorry we couldn't see the scimitar. But I suppose the insurance premiums would be heavier if it weren't kept at a bank?"

"They're heavy, anyway," Dick said.

His "good night" was a bit curt, I thought. I could understand why. And when we had picked up a cab, and were clip-clopping back along the way we had come, under a horned moon that hung silver in the sky, I could not help saying, "Granted we're hard up, A. J., but did you really have to take a tenner off poor old Ferdy?"

He seemed not to hear my question. "I see the lights are off in the bank," he said. "They must have got their balance out." He took a slip of paper from his pocket. "I also see from Ferdy's cheque, by the by, that he banks at the same place as Lesage the Egyptologist —"

My heart gave a sudden hard thud. "So *that's* what you wanted to find out! But you can't be quixotic enough to think of —"

"Trying to crack a bank vault?" he said. He put a cigarette between his lips. "So as to put a packet of insurance money in an old gambler's hands, to enable him to get square with his conscience by giving his kids a fair start in life?"

He struck a match, touched the flame to old Ferdy's cheque. The light gleamed on his opera hat.

"A mug's game, trying to crack a bank vault," said Raffles.

But I saw his odd smile, and the grey glint of his eyes, as he dipped his cigarette to the flame.

I was uneasy for a week afterwards. Nothing developed, however, and as time passed our evening at the Farrs faded from my mind. It was a good two months later, and cricket was over for the year, when one autumn night he took me to dinner at an Italian restaurant in Soho. It was one of those places of romantic assignation that have a mezzanine balcony divided into stuffily curtained cubicles, like theatre boxes; and in one of these, with the curtains closed, we dined by the light of candles with boudoir-pink shades.

The place was not my style, and I said rather peevishly, "Why did we have to come here?"

"What's the matter, Bunny?" said Raffles. "Don't you like spaghetti?"

As he spoke, he parted the curtains

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slightly so that he could peer down into the main salon. A din of voices, a plinking of mandolins, and a jingling of tambourines rose stridently from it.

"In point of fact," he said, dropping the curtain, "we came here to see a certain lady without being seen by her. I thought we ought at least to know her by sight, as she's on the eve of playing a decisive part in our affairs. She mustn't know us, though. Look discreetly and you'll see her down there across the salon — at the table by the mural of Tiberius's villa. Red-haired woman with a champagne glass in her hand, talking to a cauliflower-eared man who looks like an ex-cruiserweight."

I made a chink in the curtains, put my eye to it, and through a floating haze of cigar smoke saw the woman at once. She was strikingly handsome, though rather loudly dressed, with rust-coloured hair elaborately coiffured.

"Who is she?" I said, turning back to Raffles.

"Her name's Birdie Minton. That's her real name. She has a good many aliases." He poured chianti into our glasses. "She was recommended to me, for a little adventure I have in mind, by the only person in London, other than yourself, who knows the truth about me. That's Ivor Kern, the 'fence' I do business with. Birdie doesn't know I exist. Ivor's the go-between. So far, Birdie's carried out her instructions admirably. Two months ago, a day or two after we dined *en famille* with the Farrs, she called at the County & Continental Bank, Kensington branch."

I laid down my fork. My appetite had suddenly deserted me.

"Calling herself Mrs. Randolph," said Raffles, "and saying she'd recently returned from abroad and was house-hunting in London, she opened an account with a hundred pounds — advanced by Ivor — and also deposited with the bank, for safe-keeping till she found a house, a large packing-case containing allegedly valuable silver and carpets. It's been in the bank's vault for the past two months. The day after tomorrow, she'll call at the bank, explain that she's now found a house to her liking, and take her packing-case away in a brougham provided — since we want no traceable hackneys in this business — by Ivor Kern. She'll deliver the packing-case to Ivor, and that'll conclude her part in the affair. Foolproof, as you see."

"But what's the point of it?" I said.

"The point of it," said Raffles, "is that when she withdraws the packing-case, *I* shall be in it!" He tossed aside his napkin. "Now, if you've finished your spaghetti, Bunny, we'll take a ride in a cab."

My mind was in a turmoil as the cab carried us through the rain-wet streets, glimmering in the lamplight, to a small shop in the King's Road, Chelsea. The shop, closely shuttered, bore the legend: *Antiques — Ivor Kern — Objets d'art.* And, as the cab rolled away, Raffles jerked the bell-pull in the dark doorway.

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I heard the bell jangling remotely, within. Suddenly the flap of the letter-slot, set vertically at eye-level in the door, was poked up. I saw the yellow glimmer of a candle. Raffles spoke softly through the slot. Bolts and chains rattled, the door opened a crack, and we slipped inside.

Rebolting the door, a thin, tall man in a black suit turned to us. He held up his candlestick. His pale face and high forehead were unlined, and his dark eyes, glimmered in by twin, tiny candle-flames, regarded me with a quizzical intelligence.

"The Egyptologist, I presume?" he said. "Princess Amen is waiting."

He motioned us to follow him. Shapes of furniture bulked darkly about us, shadows loomed and shifted, innumerable clocks ticked.

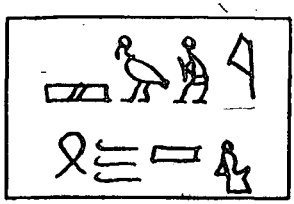
Bewildered, I whispered to Raffles, "Princess Amen?"

"An old flame," he said.

Kern opened the door of a rear room. He pointed to a coffin-like box which lay on the floor.

"Her Highness," he said.

The box was of some time-blackened wood, with a dim red diamond shape painted on each side, and here and there squares of hieroglyphs crudely painted in faded yellow, after this style:



Shipping labels stood out in sharp relief: *LESAGE — Alexandria to Tilbury; Baggage Hold; Not Wanted On Voyage; Fragile — This Side Up.*

"The box," Kern said, "has a lock that can be worked from inside. The hieroglyphs here and there help to conceal the breathing holes."

Stooping, he opened the hinged lid. The hair stirred on my scalp. The candlelight cast its flicker on a mummy case. Its mask of carven wood, though worn and defaced by 40 centuries in desert sands, yet conveyed an inhuman sense of serenity and wisdom.

"I was all last week fabricating Princess Amen," said Kern. "She's nothing but a lid, really, well pierced for breathing. Underneath are shavings —"

"On which," Raffles said, "I shall recline quite snugly. The mask slips off easily, Bunny, and Ivor has so arranged things that I can get my right hand to the inside of the lock." He dipped his cigarette in the flame of Kern's candle, and the light hollowed his eyes under the slanted brim of his opera hat. "Just before the bank closes for business tomorrow afternoon, Bunny, you'll deposit Princess Amen, for safekeeping, with your friend Mr. Purkiss, the manager."

My heart thumped.

"The sooner they lock the vault after they've closed for business," Raffles went on, "the better I shall like it. When the vault's locked, I shall desert Princess Amen. I shall

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have my bull's-eye lantern, my skeleton keys, and the run of the vault for the rest of the night. It's a pity I daren't meddle with their bullion or specie, but any defalcations of that kind would be spotted as soon as the staff arrives in the morning. No, reluctantly I shall confine myself to getting old Ferdy's scimitar from his deposit-box — and to mulcting any other boxes which strike me, on investigation, as grossly overstuffed with hoarded gems and negotiable bonds. About an hour before the staff is due to arrive in the morning, I shall get — with my plunder — into Mrs. Randolph's packing-case."

I seized on a flaw. "But isn't that already full of stuff?"

"Tarnished electro-plate and threadbare carpets," he said. "I shall transfer them to Princess Amen. The point is, Bunny, if you were to deposit Princess Amen just before close of business tomorrow, Friday, and remove her just after opening of business the following day, it might look a bit fishy. But as an old customer — the bank's known you, as Lesage, for four years — and with a good excuse you could probably bring it off. Still, it's better not to take the chance. I go in in Princess Amen, but I come out in Mrs. Randolph's packing-case. She'll call for it ten minutes after the bank opens Saturday morning. The chance of any of the deposit boxes being called for in the first ten minutes of the day's business is remote."

I stared at him, hypnotized, feeling cold beads on my brow.

"Princess Amen," he said, "together with Lesage's and Mrs. Randolph's current balances, we shall write off to running expenses. The Farr heirloom Ivor here will hold for us for a few years. Later, when Miss Josephine and Dick and Frank have got their lives well established on the basis of the insurance indemnity, we'll find out subtly whether the recovery of the heirloom would make them — or old Ferdy — any happier. If it would, then we'll contrive for the police to 'recover' it, and the Farrs can come to terms with the insurance company. Naturally, anything *else* we may glean from the vault is our own business. We aren't philanthropists!"

He smiled at my expression, pressed my shoulder with a friendly hand.

"Cheer up, Bunny," he said. "All *you* have to do is entrust the Princess to your old friend Mr. Purkiss."

It was a grey afternoon, an autumnal drizzle was falling, and raucous newsboys were shouting "Latest race results! All the winners!" when the driver provided by Ivor Kern reined in his neat brougham before the County & Continental Bank a few minutes before closing time.

In the dimness of the brougham I was cramped by the great box, which was placed obliquely across the facing seats, from corner to corner. I tapped lightly on the box, heard Raffles's answering tap from inside, and, drawing in my breath deeply, stepped from the brougham and walked into

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the bank. There were no customers at the counter. A solitary cashier there was lovingly dropping a golden cascade of sovereigns from a copper trowel into a canvas sack. At the high desks behind him clerks were posting ledgers in their beautiful copperplate. The cashier glanced at me, in my guise as Lesage, and at once smiled in recognition.

"Good afternoon, sir! Back in England again?"

I refrained from telling him that I had not been away, and merely asked if Mr. Purkiss were busy.

"He's only signing his letters, sir," said the cashier. "Perhaps you'd care just to tap on his door there?"

I tapped, was bade enter, and the manager, a sturdy, grey-bearded man in a cutaway coat, rose with outstretched hand when he saw me. "Why, Mr. Lesage! Where have you dropped from this time?"

He pushed forward a chair for me, and, after an exchange of civilities, I broached the matter of the mummy.

"Normally," I explained, "I should have left it with the museum authorities, but I'm sorry to say I've just had a rather disagreeable half hour with them. I feel they've treated me parsimoniously, and I don't intend they shall have what I've brought back with me this time. I shall negotiate elsewhere. In the meantime, I should like to entrust it to your vault — provided, that is, that you can assure me that the vault is quite dry and warm?"

"I can do so without reserve," he declared heartily, and, jerking a bell-pull, said to the burly man who answered the summons, "Ah, porter, Mr. Lesage has a box outside in a four-wheeler. Ask Mr. Andrews to help you bring it down to the vault. Now, Mr. Lesage, if you would care to step this way —"

He opened an inner door. I followed him down a short flight of steps to a gaslit stone passage. "Warm and dry, you notice," he said. "Now, here is the vault."

The immense door, as thick as that of a casemate, stood half open. As we entered, a rather dandified young man, who was checking some documents on top of a safe which stood in the centre of the vault, shuffled them together hastily.

"You may go, Mr. Dacres," Purkiss said curtly, and the young man, thrusting the papers into a deed-box, locked it, replaced it on a rack, and made himself scarce.

The vault was the size of a large room. The iron racks which lined the walls were laden with japanned deed-boxes and steel deposit-boxes, large and small. Crates, domed trunks, even gun-cases, stood here and there about the floor. Each was labelled, and a yellow line painted on the floor marked out neatly the space it occupied. The blood throbbed in my temples as I noticed a large packing-case labelled *MRS. RANDOLPH.*

"A roomy, dry, secure vault," said Purkiss. "Ah, here comes your box. We'll have it just here, Mr. Andrews, if you please. Gently now, porter.

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Thank you, that will do." He stood looking down at the box, shaking his head, as the two men left us. "The strangest treasure our vault has ever housed," he said. "Might I —"

"Of course!" Taking the key from my pocket, I unlocked the box and raised the lid.

He gazed down reverently at the worn, serene mask of Princess Amen. "Three thousand — four thousand years?" he said, his voice hushed. "It is a sobering thought, Mr. Lesage."

I relocked the box, we went back upstairs to his office, he wrote me out a deposit receipt. The bank now having closed for business, he ushered me off the premises himself. And with the closing of the door on me and the sound of bolts being shot, my part in the affair was finished. The die was cast. Raffles was in the vault.

It had been so easy. Reaction to tension left me feeling drained as I stood there in the rain, gazing at the closed doors. A bawling newsboy, thrusting a paper at me, brought me to myself. I took the paper absently, dropped a ha'penny in his hand, and turned to the brougham.

Kern's coachman drove me to my flat in Mount Street. I let myself in furtively, careful to avoid any neighbour who might spot my whitened hair, and locked the door.

Lighting the gas in my sitting-room, I poured myself a strong whiskey and soda and sank into a chair. I could not rid myself of my haunted, unreal feeling. I felt as though half of myself were missing. I could hardly believe that old Raffles was not just around the corner, in his familiar chambers in the Albany, but was locked irrevocably in the vault of a Kensington bank.

I glanced up at the clock which ticked quietly on the mantelpiece.

Yes, by now that massive door of the vault would have been swung into place, the lock set, the burglar alarms set, Purkiss and his staff on their separate ways to their homes, the bank in darkness. A tremor went through me, uncontrollably. I slumped lower in my chair, feeling around me in imagination the black silence of the vault; seeing the darkness pierced suddenly by the white ray of a bull's-eye lantern in the hand of a shadowy, black-masked figure; seeing the circle of light flit round over the racks of deed-boxes; seeing —

A sudden wild clangour of bells broke out.

I was on my feet. The vision was gone. My heart beat violently. The whiskey glass had fallen from my hand to the hearth rug. I stood staring up at the bell above the door of my sitting-room. The bell, aquiver with diminishing tremors, broke into a renewed frenzy and clamour.

I almost ran into the hall. Forgetting my whitened hair, I unlocked the door, opened it, glimpsed a tall, black-clad figure. It was Ivor Kern. He thrust in past me. I relocked the door, turned on him. There was a sheen of moisture on the pallor of his face.

"It's all up," he said. "Have you seen the paper?"

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"Paper?" My eyes went to the one I had flung unlooked-at on my sitting-room table when I came in.

Kern followed my glance. He strode through into the sitting-room, snatched up the paper.

"It was all clear, all fixed," he said. "I gave Birdie Minton her instructions yesterday to collect the 'Mrs. Randolph' packing-case as soon as the bank opened tomorrow. An hour ago, I happened to pick up the evening paper. Here —"

He thrust the paper at me. His long, pale forefinger pointed at a headline. I read: *£500 Confidencer Trick — Tourist Victimized — Woman Sought — Believed Fled Country.*

"Birdie," he said. "She's fled, all right. The instant I saw that, I got in touch with a crony of hers — ex-prizefighter she goes around with. I've just come from him. She's gone. Got clean away on the Dover-Calais boat this morning. Not one word of warning. She's in Paris by now."

His dark eyes stared at me.

"You realize what this means?" he said. "*There's no Mrs. Randolph to collect that packing-case from the bank tomorrow!*"

I did not breathe. This was nightmare. The clock ticked steadily. The gas mantel made a soft roaring. The light seemed to shine with an unnatural brilliance. Kern went to my bookcase. He splashed out whiskey from the decanter on the brass tray. The soda syphon hissed. He looked at me over his shoulder.

"When the vault's opened in the morning," he said, "Raffles will be concealed in the packing-case, expecting it to be collected within ten or fifteen minutes. And it won't be. Not in ten minutes, or fifteen — or ever!"

He emptied his glass at a gulp.

"Tomorrow's Saturday," he said. "Bank shuts at noon. Assume that the fact the deed-boxes have been looted is not discovered during the course of the morning. The vault won't be opened again till Monday morning — another forty-six hours, on top of the twenty-odd he'll already have been in there. Stale air, thirst, starvation — by Monday morning he'll certainly be unconscious, and very probably dead." He shrugged. "It comes to every cracksman, Manders — their luck runs out. They're too clever by half, they try it once too often, and —" he snapped his fingers "— finish!"

I said, with this nightmare feeling making my voice seem far-off to me, "We've got to help him."

"How?" said Kern. "Try to release him by cracking the vault ourselves? Look, if Raffles — A. J. Raffles — admitted he couldn't bust a bank vault by ordinary safecracker methods, could we? Could any other man in London?"

I could have struck him for the truth of his words. I paced the floor.

He went on inexorably, "Try getting some other woman to impersonate 'Mrs. Randolph?' It wouldn't work — not with a *bank*, Manders.

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Try forging a letter, then, from 'Mrs. Randolph,' instructing the bank to hand over the packing-case to bearer? Again, not a hope. She deposited it, was given the receipt for it, and she alone can get it out — in person. And heaven knows where she is, and certainly she'll never come back — except in handcuffs, under an extradition warrant. No, this is the end of it — the country house cricket, the eligible popular bachelor, the gentleman in the black mask, the 'amateur' of crime to whom it was all half a joke. Well, the joke's over, and this is the end of him — death or Dartmoor."

"Not," I said slowly, "without one last throw of the dice."

I was remembering something Raffles had said. "If you were to deposit Princess Amen one day and remove her the next, Bunny," he had said, "it might look a bit fishy, but as an old customer that the bank's known for four years and with a good excuse you could probably bring it off."

Kern was staring at me. "Talk sense," he said. "You've no dice to throw."

"Haven't I?" I said. "Lend me a tin of varnish and a paint brush from your shop, and we'll see!"

It was the thinnest of thin chances that sheer desperation thus had incubated in my mind. And in the cold light of morning, when I was shown into Purkiss's office, it seemed scarcely a chance at all, and the only item on the credit side was the fact that neither the clerks and cashiers outside, nor Purkiss himself, showed any sign of excitement, as they certainly would have done had they discovered as yet anything amiss in the vault.

I told Purkiss my story, rehearsed over and over throughout a sleepless night, with a glibness and plausibility that was a revelation to myself.

"So sorry to bother you," I said, "but, you know, I'd hardly left here yesterday, Mr. Purkiss, when it dawned on me that I'd entirely omitted what the museum people would have seen to at once. Most important. That is, to give the mummy case a light coat of preservative varnish before storing. If you wouldn't mind my doing it, now — I've brought the stuff with me —"

He glanced with a slight frown at the tin and brush I held. "Will it take you long, Mr. Lesage?" he said. "Saturday morning is a very busy time —"

"A mere matter of minutes, Mr. Purkiss," I said earnestly.

He fingered his watch-chain, his bearded lips pursed. I could see he was annoyed. It was touch and go. I seemed to hear the thin ice cracking under me in all directions. Abruptly, he nodded. I breathed again. He rose, opened the inner door of his office, and led the way down the steps to the vault.

I dreaded what I might see there, but all seemed in order. The deed-boxes on the racks looked undisturbed. There on the floor, in their yellow-painted squares, stood the

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domed trunks, the gun-cases, the Egyptian box — and Mrs. Randolph's packing-case. Sweat started out on me at the sight of it.

"Be as quick as you can, please," said Purkiss.

Naturally, he had no intention of leaving me. I had not hoped for such an impossibility. Raffles was in that packing-case. I knew he must be listening intently, expecting at any second to feel the packing-case lifted and borne out. The most I hoped to do was to convey to him, in some form of words addressed ostensibly to Purkiss, that things had gone wrong, that he must stay where he was till he heard the vault locked at noon, that sometime between then and Monday morning he must get back into the mummy case, and that on Monday I should come and withdraw Princess Amen. I groped desperately for words to convey all this.

"A most inconvenient thing to have happened," I said loudly, then dropped my voice to add, "my having to bother you like this, Mr. Purkiss."

I knelt down by the Egyptian box. I put my brush and my tin of varnish on the floor beside me. I felt in my pocket for the key. Mrs. Randolph's packing-case stood about six feet distant; it looked a mile to me. I thought of the possibility that the looting of the deposit-boxes would be discovered during the morning. If that happened, police would be called in and Raffles would be lost. If it did not happen, he would be here till Monday — and, as Kern had said, by then he might be dead. Yet, what else could I do but what I was doing?

"Hurry, please, Mr. Lesage," Purkiss said impatiently.

I put the key in the lock of the Egyptian box. And suddenly, belatedly, with a sense of utter despair, I realized that I dared not open it. I dared not open it because Raffles probably had stuffed into it, *on top of the mummy case*, the tarnished electro-plate and threadbare carpets from Mrs. Randolph's packing-case. And Purkiss would see them.

There was a surging like surf in my ears. I was cornered, trapped. I knelt there, staring down at the box, not daring to turn the key; and dimly I became aware of something on the box which certainly had not been there before — touches of new yellow paint among the faded yellow of the most prominent of the squares of hieroglyphs painted on the box. *Additions had been made to the hieroglyphs!*

I bent lower, pretending to have difficulty in turning the key in the lock, and slid a glance round the vault. On one of the racks was a tin of paint with a yellow-dabbed brush in it — the paint used for outlining on the floor the storage space taken up by the articles on deposit. The surging in my ears swelled louder. I looked again at the additions to the hieroglyphs. The additions were: a pair of sails, a policeman's helmet, a pair of long ears (rabbit's ears — Bunny!), three arrow-points, an opera hat and a diamond shape and a pair of legs, a pointing arm. Thus:

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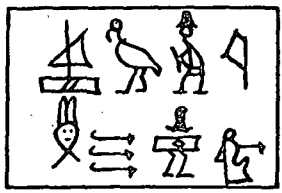

I knelt there rigid. It seemed utterly impossible that Raffles, locked all night in this vault, could have learned of Birdie Minton's flight. Yet there, clearly, was Birdie, pursued by a policeman, boarding a ship. Equally clear were the instructions to me, Bunny, that Raffles was in the Egyptian box, the box with a diamond shape painted on its side, and that I was to carry it away.

I was so stunned that I had forgotten to keep up my pretence of difficulty with the key.

"Mr. Lesage!" Purkiss said sharply. "Hurry, please!"

I looked up at him. He had his watch in his hand. I rose. Surely, I thought, I could not have misread that code. In any event, I must bank on it.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I was thinking. You know, Mr. Purkiss, I really fear I shall know no peace until this mummy is in the care of experts. I shall worry all the time. I've come to the conclusion I'd rather eat humble pie, and let the museum authorities have the mummy on their own terms. I believe I'll take it to them right away — I've a four-wheeler outside."

"Well, really, Mr. Lesage!" he said testily.

But he called for the porter and Mr. Andrews, and, leaving them to deal with the box, escorted me back up the steps to his office. I surrendered the bank's receipt; and, with a very cursory handshake, he closed — almost slammed — his door on me.

There were a good many people at the cash counter. As I walked past them towards the outer door, I heard a voice I knew speak to one of the cashiers.

"Might as well have a look at my mortgage agreement while I'm here," the voice said. "I'll trouble you to bring up my deposit-box."

I stole a glance at the speaker, and saw the back of a purplish neck topped by a rakish grey bowler. It was old Ferdy Farr!

I fairly shot out of the bank, passing the porter and Andrews, coming back in after putting the Egyptian box in the brougham. I told Ivor Kern's driver to drive like the devil to his boss's place, and I squeezed into the brougham, along with the great box, as the driver cracked his whip.

I tapped on the box. "Raffles?"

The weight of the world seemed to lift from me as I heard his voice: "Good work, Bunny!"

The clopping of the horse's hoofs broke from a fast trot into a canter. I looked back anxiously through the open window, watching for any sign of pursuit. I still had seen none when I felt his hand on my shoulder. He was out of the box. He dropped onto the seat beside me, massaging his thighs, smiling.

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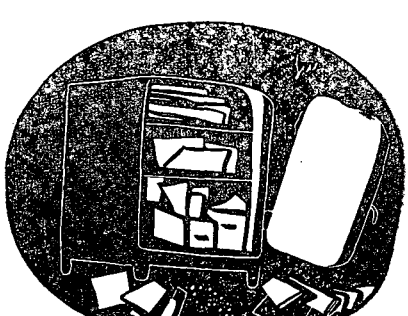
"I never doubted you'd come," he said, "as soon as you heard of Birdie's flitting. My only fear was that you wouldn't spot my little hieroglyphic code." He took out his cigarette case. "You know, I quite enjoyed myself in that vault — up until the moment when, as I was going through the deed-boxes, I came across that very afternoon's paper in one of them. I wondered what the devil it was doing there, took a look at it — and, by heaven, I saw that story about Birdie Minton! Bunny, from then on, my night in that vault was an interminable nightmare. Would *you* see the story? If so, what would you do? And could I contrive a message for *you?*" He shook his head. "That newspaper saved my skin, Bunny. But how the devil did it get into a deed-box in the vault?"

"Dacres!" I said. "When I arrived at the bank with Princess Amen yesterday afternoon, the newsboys were shouting the latest race results. This Dacres, a dandified young chap, was down in the vault when Purkiss and I entered it. Dacres shuffled some documents hastily into a deed-box he had open. I'll lay a hundred to one that, under cover of the work he was supposed to be doing, he had a paper he'd just bought and was checking race results on the sly. He didn't want Purkiss to see him with a newspaper in his hand, so he just shoved it into the deed-box along with the documents, and didn't get a chance to retrieve it. And Ivor Kern imagined your luck had run out!"

Raffles laughed aloud. "Not yet! And it's in for Miss Josephine and Dick and Frank, too — because old Ferdy's due to have a good, ripe insurance indemnity fall into his lap!" He lighted a Sullivan. "Now, let's open Princess Amen's box and have a look at the rest of the swag — if it's all right behind, Bunny?"

I glanced back again through the oval window. The horse's hoofs were clopping rhythmically again in a brisk trot. There was no sign of pursuit. In the grey morning light the good old London drizzle was falling. Never had it looked so beautiful to me.

"All right behind," I said.



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FATAL FORMULA

by DON MORSE

Sing a song of cyanide,
Of murder in a glass.
Four and twenty droplets
Did the trick, alas!

The corpse was in the parlor,
Ankle deep in money.
Robbery the motive?
Come, now, don't be funny!

The maid was in the garden,
Hanging by her hose.
Strangled with her stockings—
Now what would you suppose?

When the case was opened,
The wife began to sing.
She was such a dainty dish,
What verdict *could* they bring?

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A lecherous Oriental potentate — three exotic dancers, one of them notorious for her ambition and avarice — a multiblooded informer and a Damascene impresario and a lovesick Bedouin . . . In the twisted threads of their lives Inspector Chafik of the Baghdad police sees the pale hand of Death . . .

THE FACE OF THE ASSASSIN

by CHARLES B. CHILD

INSPECTOR CHAFIK J. CHAFIK, WHO for the past hour had contemplated a glass of non-alcoholic beverage without moving or speaking, abruptly announced to his equally silent and absorbed companion, "Your thoughts are the dreams of a hashish eater, Abdullah. You would get nowhere, not on a policeman's pay. Exotic women are jewels for princes —" He looked at the woman who sinuated in the cabaret spotlight, and then looked beyond her to the arbor where the extraordinarily tall, gaunt, sallow man sat.

The honored guest sat erect in the chair. He had a wedge-shaped head; the widest part was the back. His shirt front glittered with orders and his long, bejeweled hands flashed as he applauded.

The Inspector sternly reminded himself this was the chief executive of a sister country, who was paying a state visit to Baghdad.

"One would think," Chafik said, "that His Excellency would have vertigo watching the gyrations of this woman's stomach. But his predilection is an international byword — and because of it, Abdullah, you and I are doomed to lose sleep lest his pleasure be disturbed by an assassin's bullet."

He selected a cigarette, offered it to the sergeant, and chose another for himself. The flame of the match accentuated the hollows of his swarthy cheeks. He had a fine nose, rather heavy lips, and a high forehead. His eyes were large, dun-colored like the land of his birth, and weary with the cynicism of a very old race. He was a little man and his well-cut clothes failed to hide his thinness.

The Inspector tried to relax. The cabaret was a pleasant garden, cooled by breezes from the river Tigris. It was secluded. Police patrolled the surrounding area; all guests had been screened before admission; staff and entertainers had been checked and double-checked. All this was routine protection accorded to any visiting dignitary.

But Chafik sat nibbling his nails.

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Sergeant Abdullah, a dour man, said soothingly, "Sir, an assassin has not a camel's chance to pass —"

"The eye of a needle, Abdullah, is a broad gate when Death is the visitor."

The sheepskin tongues of the drums bayed at the profane heels of the dancer who had His Excellency's attention. Chafik, who had reached the fourth of the seven stages of man, was unmoved and saw the tall young woman merely as an entry on police records. He knew more about Selima than she cared to remember. Her path to fame and notoriety was strewn with men exploited by her ambition and avarice. The capital cities of the Middle East acclaimed her queen of entertainers, and she toured constantly, jealous of her place in the limelight. Chafik guessed His Excellency was the bait that had brought Selima to Baghdad.

"Magnificent but ruthless," he said. "This woman has never known pity and must expect none. Observe the shadow, her Nemesis."

The Inspector pointed with his chin at a small, dark girl who wove the pattern of her dance with that of Selima's. She had a childish face and an informed body and copied every movement and mannerism of the star.

"Name, Gutne," Chafik quoted from the filing system in his brain. "A child of the desert. Age, sixteen. Her story is in her eyes. She hates and envies Selima and one day will dethrone her. But she is a novice; His Excellency will not look at her."

The sergeant made no answer, and the Inspector looked for the source of distraction. A third woman was in the shadows, posed against a lush background of flower beds and gently stirring palms.

"Your taste improves," Chafik told Abdullah. "Ayeb, age eighteen and a half. A true artiste. How pastoral is her dance! She expresses poetry, not passion. I respect her — what she earns she lavishes on a small daughter — but she looks haggard tonight. I wonder why." He added, "Note how she avoids the rooster's eye. She does not seek to win the embraces of our wealthy guest." And then he said hopefully, "Perhaps she will win the accolade of the impresario Farak, who is here from Damascus to seek talent. If the man is wise, he will recognize Ayeb's gift. Does he watch her tonight?"

The Inspector glanced around the cabaret. It was an oasis in a drab world. The sky, with its starry lanterns, was deep purple, stretched taut from horizon to horizon like the roof of a tent. Chafik knew a moment of peace. But the illusion was shattered when he saw a man approaching the table, a man dressed in black, who had the feline walk of an executioner.

"How fortunate we are in the open air!" Chafik said.

"Sir?" said Abdullah.

"We are about to suffer an odoriferous presence — Mr. Taquibadi, the informer."

And he looked, as across an abyss, at the man, who smiled and bowed

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ingratiatingly. "Whom do you sell me tonight, Taquibadi?" he asked sadly.

Taquibadi had Greek blood and Smyrnese blood; he had ancestry in Persia and Turkey, and roots in the Lebanon. His birthplace was Alexandria, but he carried the passport of a British subject from Cyprus.

In early days he had been a police agent for the czar, later served the Bolsheviks, then was an informer for Kemal Atatürk. The English had used him in wartime intelligence. He took the pay of the police of many lands and was faithful to none.

Taquibadi did not look directly at Chafik, but rather all around the little man. He sat hugging himself, as if he were cold, and his dry lips worked nervously.

"You love your jest, Inspector," he said, whispering because the furtive years had made whispering natural. "But how well you know you need what I have to sell!"

"Pilate," Chafik said, "soiled his hands with Judas. I am contaminated by the necessity of you. There are pickings in the dregs where you swim, and sometimes I must buy garbage. What have you?"

"They say down in the dregs that an attempt will be made on His Excellency's life."

The Inspector shrugged. "There is always danger. I have taken precautions. I hold several who might have hoped to remove His Excellency. His enemies are many — and I have excellent records."

"But not complete records."

"I am not infallible," Chafik agreed.

"If anything should happen here in Baghdad —"

"The political importance of His Excellency would bury my meager carcass under the rubble of nations." Chafik lighted a cigarette with a calm he did not feel. Suddenly his lean face hardened and he rasped at the informer, "You Father of Vultures! Show me your carrion, or —"

"I have seen a face," Taquibadi said hastily.

"A face?"

"I remember it from Teheran, when they killed Razmara. I saw it again in Jerusalem when King Abdullah was assassinated. I saw it in Cairo, when —"

"If you had not been sired by a hyena, I would suspect you! This face you associate with assassination, you have seen it here? The man is in Baghdad?"

Taquibadi moistened his ever-dry lips. "Did I say a man?" he asked, and his shoulders shook with silent laughter.

"Have a care," Chafik said, "or you may hear the laughter of whips. Tell me whom you suspect."

The informer hesitated, looked furtively around, and then said, "I am not yet sure the face I saw was the same face. I must look at it again. Tomorrow I will be certain. Yes, tomorrow. You will pay me? How much is it worth?"

"Thirty pieces of silver," Chafik answered in disgust. "Take yourself away! But come tomorrow, or —"

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He followed the man with his eyes and saw him leave the cabaret.

"Call headquarters," the Inspector told Abdullah. "Tell them to follow Taquibadi and note whom he meets, or seems to watch. Possibly he lies. He has brought many worthless tales, but —"

He plucked a flower from a bush, inhaled the perfume, then threw it down.

"Ah," he exclaimed, "what a disgusting profession I follow!"

He was gnawed by his thoughts as by worms. The responsibility for the protection of his country's guest, always a heavy burden, now became acute anxiety; he had hardly slept since His Excellency's arrival, and when he looked at the man in the arbor, he saw him as a blur. More than ever, he was afraid to rest his eyes.

He wondered how such an individual as the Emaciated One could represent such an ancient and honorable nation.

My conscience might rest if he could be removed without repercussion, the Inspector thought. But death would set off a trail of death. Assassination might fire the Middle East, and out of the embers would rise the phoenix of new oppression.

For relief, Chafik looked at the dancing girls and heeded the satyr call of the drums, which now drowned the music of rubebes and oboes.

The dance had reached its climax. Selima imperiously motioned the other entertainers to the background. Ayeb faded into the shadows, but Gutne stood, her eyes flaming with rebellion and hatred, and blocked the path of the star.

Selima's fierce undertone reached Chafik: "If you were a woman I would put my seal on your face," she said to the girl. "But you are a child, and later I will thrash you. Out of the way — suckling —"

She struck Gutne across the mouth and then glided out onto the floor and halted before His Excellency. To the roar of the drums she arched her magnificent body and bent slowly back, ever back, until her loosened hair touched the floor. Her hands were castanets, and her tapering thighs gleamed ivory where the gown opened. Lips parted, eyes veiled by lashes, Selima seemed to recline on a divan of shadows.

His Excellency got up from his chair and went to her.

He misapplies the Koran, Chafik thought with disgust. He watched the wedge-headed man pin a generous handful of dinar bills to the gown of the dancer. The paper money fluttered like leaves in the river breeze.

Gutne, the Bedouin, ran from the floor. Her childish face was heavy with paint and streaked with tears. She threw Selima a look as she passed near Chafik's table, and, interpreting it, he said, "Your murderous intent will be marked on your records."

She recognized the police and spat like a cat. He let her go and raised amused eyes to the lovely and haggard face of Ayeb, who followed. "There is no envy in your heart."

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The woman answered, "Only bewilderment. Surely Selima is rich enough — why then let the monster paw her?"

The Inspector covered his ears. "Duty forbids me to listen to what you say about our guests, but my heart applauds."

He saw that Ayeb was troubled. "You have an art," he told her. "A true career. Are you afraid the impresario who seeks talent might pass you for Selima or Gutne?"

Ayeb shook her head. "I do not seek Farak's interest. Perhaps he finds nothing in any of us. I have not seen him tonight. Ah, I was wrong! There he is, near the gate. He arrived late."

They both glanced at the thin, stooped man who was famous in the Middle East for his theatrical ventures. He was fitting a cigarette into a long holder. His face was ascetic for a caterer of flesh, and he wore boredom like a cloak.

Chafik turned back to Ayeb. She was saying, with anguish in her voice, "Will he never go, this skinny one who keeps us from our homes? My little daughter is ill — a wasting malady. I should be with her."

"I understand your anxiety. I have a son."

"I would do anything to make my daughter well," the woman said passionately. Her expression was more than anxious. She reminded Chafik of a tigress.

"If you need a good doctor —" he began.

"Good doctors are expensive," the woman said with despair. "Perhaps I will listen to Gutne. She wants to get me a healing spell from a hakim —"

"And who is this Father of Wizards?"

"She keeps him secret so none of us can buy his potions for ourselves. Poor child!" Ayeb added sympathetically. "She put a curse on Selima tonight — drops of distilled nonsense in her coffee. Alas for Gutne! See her now, trying to win the approval of Mr. Farak."

They saw the impresario flick the Bedouin girl away like a troublesome fly, and she came running back across the garden, furious, the bangles on her honey-colored arms jangling.

"Selima will surely beat her," Ayeb said.

"Nevertheless, one day this child will ruin Selima," Chafik announced. "The ambition of a termite can destroy a palace." He shrugged and said, "But it won't happen yet. Tomorrow — oh, merciful God! — His Excellency leaves us. What will you dance at the gala performance he has commanded?"

"We recreate the Court of Scheherazade."

"Ah! A Thousand and One Nights — so appropriate to Baghdad! Who will be the Queen of Love?"

"Selima. Gutne and I will be her slaves."

The lights in the cabaret blazed, and the band began to play His Excellency's anthem. Inspector Chafik stood to attention, and then, with a smile for Ayeb and a word of comfort

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about her daughter, he went to the gate to supervise the guest's departure.

He was assailed by noise. The police were struggling with a man who wore the lacy caftan of a Bedouin. His headdress lay in the dust, trampled, and his pomaded ringlets hung bedraggled about his lean and savage face. The young man and the police shouted as they fought.

Chafik made order out of chaos, then stood on tiptoe to match the prisoner's stature. He asked, "Who is this man?"

They told him, "Kassem."

"Kassem," Chafik repeated, and the filing cabinet of his brain turned up an index card. "There is a Kassem," he said, "of the tribe of Al Na'sani, and there is a woman — a child — of that tribe named Gutne —"

The young man shouted, "Gutne, Gutne! Oh, Flower of the Cotton — they promised you would be my bride!"

Chafik said, "So a star is born. Here is the beginning of the ladder of lovers. Like Selima, the little Gutne, too, would sell her soul for fame." He shrugged and told the police to take Kassem away. "Release him in the city," the Inspector said. "His only transgression is that he loves foolishly."

He felt very weary and longed for bed and the soporific warmth of his wife of many years. He leaned against a wall and made an effort to watch His Excellency depart. The sound of the sirens, sweeping the way clear to the White Palace, the government guesthouse, was the nicest music he had heard that night.

But when, thankful that his guardianship was ended for a few hours, he turned to go to his car, he was stopped by Sergeant Abdullah.

The Sergeant said, "Sir, there was a call from headquarters. They found Taquibadi."

"Found him? I told them to follow him. I —"

"Sir —"

"Oh, man of ill omen! Croak your say!"

"Sir," Abdullah said again. "They found Taquibadi. He lies in the Street of the Peaceful Garden, not far from here. There are four bullets in him."

In the morning, in his office overlooking Rashid Street, Inspector Chafik held a conversation with an empty chair. He had rarely been so tired and strained and less master of himself.

There had been no witnesses to the murder of Taquibadi. The killer had stepped from the crowds gathered near the cabaret, used the gun, and returned to anonymity. The shots had not been heard; the neighborhood was noisy with the exhausts of police motorcycles on their way to escort His Excellency.

"So," Chafik said, "our precautions were used as cover. This is a thinking killer." He nodded. "Yes," he said. "It would appear Taquibadi was very dangerous to somebody. The face that haunted him was a body."

The Inspector was interrupted by a

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respectful knocking and realized it had been going on for some time. The door opened and Sergeant Abdullah peered in.

"Sir," he said. "I heard you talking and thought you had a visitor. I did not know you were alone."

"Be seated," Chafik said sharply, irritated as always, by the discovery of his habit of talking to himself. "I was thinking of the informer. I should have held him and torn the information from him."

The sergeant said soothingly, "If we gave our time to every one of these creatures who hopes to earn a few dinars —"

"They gather like flies to a dunghill," Chafik said impatiently. "Nevertheless, it is now clear Taquibadi had a truth and was killed because he had it. His death puts flesh on an old suspicion."

"Sir?"

"Abdullah, there is direction behind the nationalism which has taken so many in our Moslem world. It was not a madman who really killed the King of Jordan, nor a fanatic who cut down Razmara. And the assassinations in Syria and Egypt — they who were hanged were also tools. This is known to the police of many lands. They have made many tries on His Excellency. This scrawny creature does not decorate life, but the world of today is not beautiful, and the assassination of a tyrant would make it hideous with conflagration." And the Inspector added, "Out of the carcass of the lion came forth honey. Out of the disgusting corpse of Taquibadi comes a warning: there is one here in Baghdad who directs the pale hand of death."

Sergeant Abdullah said, "O Compassionate One, protect us!"

"Protection," Chafik told him, "is the stoutness of our police shield. We have sifted Baghdad with a fine sieve. We have jammed our jails with the residue. Yet there still remains the face Taquibadi saw."

"This man must have the face of a devil," Abdullah said.

"There are female devils. When I asked Taquibadi, 'Is this man here?' — meaning in the cabaret — he answered, 'Did I say a man?' "

The Inspector blew on his cigarette to make it burn evenly. "Perhaps it was said in jest," he went on. "We have no clue. The informer kept no records, and all he knew drained through the holes in his head. But we must now assume an attack will be made, and the question is: By whom?"

He jumped ahead of the slower-thinking sergeant: "If this is in the pattern of the other assassinations, the unknown will use a human tool. We cannot disregard a planted bomb, although such a method is European, not Arab. But whatever the chosen instrument, it requires someone who can get close to His Excellency."

"Someone doomed," Abdullah said.

"Yes. Even a madman would know that the bullets of the bodyguard would be his punishment. However, let us continue reasoning. Who for a time could be alone with our honored

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guest, and unwatched by us on that occasion?"

Abdulla said, "Sir, there is only one such possibility." He flushed and added delicately, "I refer to His Excellency's predilection —"

"Oh, most bashful of sergeants! You mean his women!"

The Inspector's animation was brief. "So again we come to Taquibadi's evasion, which suggested a woman. But which woman?" he asked with distress. "There are three who might win the Emaciated One's favor, and none, surely, would sacrifice her white neck to the noose. The foolish child, Gutne, could she be so foolish? And Ayeb, who loves her daughter so fiercely? Selima? It is difficult to read that one's mind beyond the page that chronicles her love of wealth and power. So far as we know, she is politically clean."

He added, after a moment's reflection, "She travels a lot. Of the three women, she is the only one who has performed in all the cities of the Middle East."

Abdullah said: "In reference to these women, I now report on their morning's activities. Selima is closeted with sewing maids —"

"She will make a magnificent Scheherazade in the performance tonight," Chafik said absently.

"The child, Gutne, granted an interview to the man, Kassem."

"And he did not knife her? He, a Bedouin sick with love?"

"Sir," Abdullah said, "the interview was held through the bars of a window. Without doubt, Kassem was sent away. He departed weeping."

"He does not know how fortunate he is! And what of Ayeb?"

"The dancer you admire, sir?"

"My admiration is entirely for her maternal devotion," Chafik said indignantly.

The sergeant apologized for a cough. "The item about her is also maternal. Her daughter's condition has worsened: the child needs the attention of a specialist. Ayeb asked at the cabaret for money, and was refused."

"Poor woman!" Chafik said. "She would give her life for the child."

He propped the lids of his eyes with his fingers. His brain was fogged by questions and his sleepless body exhausted.

"We get nowhere," he announced. "The hypothesis I created has me in its coils. I cannot stop the women dancing — His Excellency's displeasure would override my fears. There is no proof of anything. Except —"

"Sir?" Abdullah said.

"Taquibadi's killer walks in Baghdad. A patient person, whose arrangements are complete. Tonight is the last night His Excellency will be with us. The blow will be struck, then."

The Inspector spent the rest of the day sifting the reports of police spies. The *faddhl* of the cafés often gave valuable leads, but this time he found nothing in the idle gossip. Taquibadi had been naturally secretive, and his killer was a phantom.

Chafik went home to change for the evening. His troubled stomach re-

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fused the food his wife prepared. He was irritated by the high spirits of his small son and was thankful when the sergeant brought the car to the door.

"Nothing new, Abdullah?"

"Nothing untoward, sir."

"To me," Chafik said in the shrill voice of nerves, "all things seem troublesome. What do you call untoward?"

"The woman, Selima, beat an impertinent sewing maid unconscious with the heel of a shoe. And that lovesick Bedouin, Kassem, assaulted Mr. Farak in the street. A constable intervened."

"Why did he assault Farak?"

"I did not ascertain, sir."

The anger of the Inspector buffeted his ears. Then, finding control, Chafik patted the big man's arms and said, "Forgive me. I am hard drawn, like a hangman's rope. Where do they keep Kassem?"

Abdullah drove him to the Alwiyah police station. The Bedouin was brought in handcuffed. He had torn his clothes and lacerated his face, and his speech was rambling.

Chafik said, "Oh, lovesick and shatter-pated young man! Why not return to your desert? A woman is as illusory as a moonbeam."

He put a lighted cigarette between Kassem's lips and made him sit on a bench against the wall. "Now tell me why you assaulted Farak," he said in a friendly voice.

"The man would have taken her away."

"Illusion! Your Gutne is a child without experience in the theater. Farak would not waste his time on her."

The Bedouin raised his joined fists and shook them in helpless rage. "I saw my love today. She told me — tonight she wins the Emaciated One!"

"You mean our honored guest?"

"May dogs devour his entrails!"

Detached, without heat, the Inspector took the manacled man by the ears and hammered his head against the wall. "Come to your senses," he said. "What did Gutne tell you?"

"She said she would prove to Farak she could win the favor of one like His Excellency. The Damascene promised that, if she did, he would make her a great dancer, greater than Selima."

"Selima would destroy her first," Chafik said.

Kassem slipped sideways and lay weeping. The Inspector went to the washbowl in the corner of the room and washed his hands; under the faucet his fingers were the legs of a spider, spinning. He saw his eyes in the mirror when he combed his sleek hair, and their fire matched the stone of the signet ring on his left hand.

Behind him, Abdullah asked, "Shall I beat this man?"

Chafik turned in surprise; he had forgotten the Bedouin. "His stupidity is no greater than mine. You should beat me. It was all there. Motive, method, the face that Taquibadi saw — all there."

He looked at his watch. "Time to

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go," he said. "It would be discourteous to keep Death waiting."

They had made over the cabaret to resemble the court of the caliph in the days of Baghdad's glory. His Excellency sat enthroned, his feet on a rich carpet, his eyes hidden behind dark glasses. Attendants in period costume moved about their duties.

Inspector Chafik threaded his way among the guests and paused at the table of the Damascene impresario to apologize. "We pride ourselves on the orderliness of our streets," he said.

Farak dismissed the incident and the apology with a shrug. "A foolish young man in love," he said. "Quite unimportant."

"We of the police consider all things important."

Chafik went on to the pavilion which had been set up for the dancers. Heralds stood at the entrance with trumpets raised. Inside, Selima was making adjustments to the net of seed pearls that covered her hair. She was magnificent in a costume of gold, her ankles and arms laden with jeweled bangles. The heels of her bare feet were hennaed.

She gave the Inspector a look reserved for a lesser servant, then recognized him and frowned, as a queen might frown, for she was already living the part of Scheherazade.

"What brings you?" the woman asked.

"A passing interest," he said. "I remember when, here in Baghdad, you gave your favor for small coins thrown by poor men. Now . . ."

He touched his forehead in a mock salaam and did not fail to notice Selima's fury, and her fear.

The procession had formed. Ayeb and Gutne, who wore the diaphanous garments of slave girls, were to precede the star with offerings for the distinguished guest. Ayeb had a tray piled with dainties made from an ancient recipe, and Gutne carried a goblet filled with a cool sherbet of diluted fruit juices sweetened with honey. The refreshments had been prepared under the supervision of the police.

Ayeb was tired, her face pale, and as she passed Chafik he saw her lips move as if in prayer. Poor mother, he thought.

Selima gave a signal, and the brass tongues of the heralds' trumpets shouted through the garden. To the clash of cymbals, the twang of lyres, the sound of flutes, the performers started from the pavilion.

Gutne was already swaying her shapely hips in the first movement when the voice of Inspector Chafik, more challenging than the trumpets, made confusion.

He sprang to the doorway and caught the Bedouin girl by the wrist; he took away the sherbet cup, passed it to Abdullah, then savagely twisted Gutne's arm.

"She-devil!" he shouted. "Drop it!"

He caught her closed left hand. She sank her teeth into his wrist, but he jerked free and bent back her little

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finger until she screamed with pain. The fist opened. A glass vial fell to the floor.

"I saw you empty it in the cup!" Chafik shouted. "Little fool!"

He struck her with the flat of his hand, and she fell weeping into the arms of Ayeb. Then he turned on Selima, who was crying her rage at the interrupted performance. "Silence, you woman of many lovers!"

Authority gave the little man stature; he dominated them all, his hot and angry eyes going from one to the other.

Only Ayeb dared stand up to him. "Shame," she said, "that a man should strike a child!"

Calmer now, Chafik answered, "But I saw her pour from the vial into the cup. What was it? Another potion like the one you told me she put in Selima's coffee?"

And, advancing on Gutne, he demanded, "Or was it like the one you promised to buy Ayeb for her sick daughter!"

Gutne whispered, "Only a charm, a harmless charm to win His Excellency! Only that — a hakim's philter."

The Inspector said to one of his men, "Go bring a dog. A thirsty dog." And to the Bedouin girl he said, quite gently, "Child, your mind is filled with superstitions and cabala and further distorted with envy of Selima. Did you truly believe a sorcerer's mumbo jumbo would make you a great dancer?"

"He said it — the hakim promised — I was to sip the cup, then offer it. The spell would blind the Emaciated One to all but me! Then, by the grace of his favor —"

"So!" Chafik said.

A constable came in, dragging a yellow hound. Chafik took the sherbet cup, poured its contents into a dish, and put the dish on the floor. The dog retreated, snarling, but presently thirst made it lap.

A minute passed, then two. Suddenly the pariah raised its ugly head, looked at the Inspector with reproachful eyes, coughed, rolled over, and died.

"In this way," the Inspector said, "you and His Excellency would have died, Gutne, and with you would have gone the only clue."

He shook the girl to stop her screams. "Who is the hakim?"

She cried hysterically, "I never met him! I — I — it is the Damascene who knows him! He bought me the philter! He said if I won the Emaciated One from Selima —"

Chafik stood looking at her. "Only a child," he said softly. "Yet what a deadly weapon in the right hand!"

And then he said, "Later I will have you remanded to the care of a heartsick lover, one named Kassem. He will take you to his tents and beat you and make you into a good bride. But first —"

Chafik reached under his coat to the snug shoulder holster. "I have an appointment with a face," he announced. "The face that Taquibadi saw."

Confusion had spread to the cabaret. The call of the trumpets, so

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abruptly ended, and the failure of the dancers to appear displeased His Excellency and disturbed the other guests. It was also a warning.

The Inspector saw the stoop-shouldered man leaving by the main gate, and restrained a shout because confusion might become turmoil. So, unalerted, the police let Farak pass.

Chafik followed swiftly. In the street, the man turned and saw him, then ran, menacing the crowd with a gun.

If I fire, Chafik thought, I may claim victims among these sheep. The English, in their own land, are wise. They do not permit armed police.

A bullet sang in his ear. He heard, above the shouting, the sound of Farak's gun. Crouching, turning the target of his body sideways, he zigzagged in pursuit.

The sleeve of his jacket ripped from cuff to elbow. Something hot and hissing creased his left hip. He cried out, and his hand went up; then he saw people running and ducking and disciplined his trigger finger. "No," he said. "I must not shoot!"

There was a thickening of the crowd, a wedged herd of frightened bodies. Farak dodged the impasse and went out into the street. He did not see the car, a police jeep, which was moving fast with a startled man at the wheel.

The headlights glared. Steel met flesh with a soft tearing noise, and above the scream of the brakes echoed the scream of Farak.

Chafik put his gun away, smoothed his clothes, and found a cigarette. He stood over the twitching corpse and thought: How devilishly clever! And who would have suspected this famous impresario? Cairo, Damascus, Teheran — he could go openly anywhere —

The dying man gave a final kick.

"Somewhere," the Inspector said as he turned away, "Taquibadi laughs. I, of all people, have avenged him."

When he returned to the cabaret, he found the lights dimmed, His Excellency gone.

Chafik said to Sergeant Abdullah, "Has the creature, then, departed so early with Selima?"

Abdullah answered, "That temperamental woman exhibited hysterics. I had her removed."

"Then possibly Ayeb transgresses for the worthy cause of a sick daughter?"

"She had a message, sir. The child passed the crisis, and she has gone to her. His Excellency —"

"He has no companion tonight?"

"None, sir. He is very displeased."

"Displeased!" Inspector Chafik hugged himself and laughed. "Sweet word!" he said. "Tomorrow I shall be reprimanded because our country's honored guest slept badly — but, oh, how just and understanding and merciful is God!"

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WINNER OF A SPECIAL AWARD

In his letter accompanying the manuscript of "Father Was Always Right," the author predicted that we would "find the story a bit off the beaten track." Mr. Mulligan was right. He also described his story as "a piece of historical fiction." Again Mr. Mulligan was right. In fact, in everything he said in his letter Mr. Mulligan Was Always Right.

The author is a correspondent with the AP. He holds graduate degrees from Boston University and Harvard. In 1948 he won Second Prize in Tomorrow Magazine's short story contest, and in 1951 he won First Prize in the American Newspaper Publishers Association's annual Journalism Awards . . . all of which gives you every valid reason to expect one of EQMM's "specials" . . .

FATHER WAS ALWAYS RIGHT

by HUGH A. MULLIGAN

THE STATEMENTS I AM ABOUT TO make may seem, at first, extraordinary and absurd; and were it not for the fact that I am motivated by the highest ideals, I would be perfectly willing to leave them unwritten forever. However, in this age of widespread historical research, when even the most intimate memoirs and correspondence are brought before the public eye, I am convinced I can no longer justly withhold from publication the story I have been sacredly entrusted with, for more than half a century. Time has deadened whatever malicious sting the facts may have once had. They can hurt no one now, and they are of interest to none but the students and the political scientists. It is to these that I dedicate what has been my precious heritage.

William Jennings Bryan would have been elected twenty-fifth President of the United States had it not been for my father. I often used to think that Father might have remained a loyal and conscientious Democrat had it not been for William Jennings Bryan, but now I know that is not true. Father never belonged to any party, although he was looked upon as a political seer in our county, Orange, and the two counties across the river, Dutchess and Putnam. Part of this reputation stemmed from the Newburgh *Telegraph*, a bi-weekly newspaper that had been in the family since 1808. The *Telegraph* had not once failed to pick the winner in a Presidential race from Madison's second term right up to William Howard Taft's election, when it sus-

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pended publication and was sold to a job-printing company.

The other portion of Father's fame came from his dynamic personality. He wore success like a birthmark. It was in him to excel as it is in some men to be tall or stout or bald. His accomplishments were as natural to him as the sparkle of his eyes or the rhythm of his loping walk.

He was a local champion at checkers. Twice he had gone to Saratoga Spa for the State finals, and twice he had memorialized the competence of Newburgh's team with the display of a silver loving cup in the lobby of the old Front Street Hotel. He had a knack for horseshoe pitching and might have earned a living by it. And, next to politics, he loved hunting and fishing best. He was considered one of the finest marksmen in the Hudson Valley.

Father's many activities took him on long trips up and down the Valley. Wherever he went, people remembered him for his superiority in whichever role they chanced to meet him — editor, orator, sportsman, or athlete. He was one of those mid-Victorian titans, and the world is not a better place for their extinction.

Even at the age of seven, I realized that Father was a man to be reckoned with in our town. When I sent my hoop dancing along the cobblestoned streets or pulled my sled up glistening white hills, I heard people speak of him and his paper.

"Do you think Corbett will endorse Cleveland?"

"Don't know. My guess is the *Telegraph* will come out for Harrison . . ."

I wasn't born in any numerical year, for ours was a quadrennial calendar. Birthdays or anniversaries were milestoned by the memory of Presidential campaigns. I came into the world one frosty late October afternoon while Father led a parade of frenzied tradesmen up Main Street, chanting:

James G. Blaine,
James G. Blaine,
Continental liar,
From the State of Maine!

I am sure I didn't hear them, but on my fourth birthday I could generate sufficient volume to shout the *Telegraph's* new slogan:

Too bad, Grover,
It's all over.
Make way, men
Here comes Ben!

The two elections are typical of Father. When Cleveland ran for his first term, Father sponsored a three-hour torchlight parade and toasted his success with an "In the Clover With Grover" breakfast at the Town Hall. Four years later, Father spurned the New Yorker and threw his support behind Benjamin Harrison, a Republican. And it surprised no one, when he returned to the once-elected, once-defeated Cleveland again in 1892, with Orange, Dutchess and

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Putnam swinging right along behind him. The three counties consulted the *Telegraph* and voted accordingly. Father's infallibility had brought them a measure of fame, and they were grateful and loyal to him.

The Spring of '96 was a season of anxiety. I was twelve years old and knew that in November Father would allow me to carry a kerosene torch in the big election-night parade. Sitting on a hill, golden with honeysuckle, I often watched the great river pass majestically below. I tried to imagine what sort of man I would be cheering for, whose name would be on the big oilcloth banners. My man would win, there was no doubt about that; Father was always right. From the *Telegraph* I was familiar with such names as "Silver Dick" Bland, William McKinley, and "Free Soil" LaFollette. I tried playing games to pick our candidate. Far off, where the river wound beneath Anthony's Nose, I could see the freight barges and the grain gondolas sliding down with the current, and every now and then a frail puff of cotton hung along the east shore, indicating a fast mail train on its way to New York. A barge brought a vote for McKinley; a gondola one for Bland; and so on until, by the end of the afternoon, the Fates had given me an answer. They gladly obliged, but each day the tally was different. Finally, I thought it about time to ask Father.

"I don't know yet," he said. "Just wait and see. We all have to wait."

The waiting was unbearable. Orange could do it. Putnam showed no impatience. Dutchess was completely without concern. And Father was a sphinx. No one seemed to care but me.

July visited us, hot and beautiful. Father left on a long trip to St. Louis and Chicago, where he was going to attend the Republican and Democratic national conventions. When he left, there were the usual tears and sandwich baskets and last-minute handkerchiefs of that age of slower transportation. From then on, every day, I faithfully struck off the large numbers on our Wells, Fargo calendar against his return. Centuries seemed deadlocked. The more days I crossed off, the more there seemed to be. Would he never return? Would those conventions last into eternity? What if I should die without ever getting a chance to carry my torch?

One sultry evening, as I watched the purple fall out of the mountains into the river, I saw a man walking up our road, and the carefree swing of his shoulders was thrillingly familiar. I ran shouting down the hill to greet him.

"Who is it, Father? Tell me quick," I panted. "Who's our man going to be?"

He smiled gently at me, patting my head, an indication that all could wait until after supper. Parents of yesterday never seemed to worry about emotional suppressions in their offspring. I know I ate supper that night without realizing what was on the blue willow-ware before me.

At last Mother began clearing away

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the dishes. I watched Father reach for his ornate cigar box, calmly select a stubby brown Carolina Queen, and settle back in the luxury of domestic contentment. Little twinkles appeared in his eyes, then great bonfires. He bit off the end of the cigar, spat it into the grate emphatically, and shouted suddenly:

"Ours is not a war of conquest. We are fighting in defense of our homes, our families, and our children! We have petitioned and our petitions have been scorned. We have entreated and our entreaties have been disregarded. We have begged and they have mocked when our calamity came. We beg no longer! We entreat no more! We petition no more. We defy! We shall answer their demands for a gold standard by saying to them: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns . . . you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold!"

It wasn't until the last echoes of the ringing climax died in the corners of the old house that I dared a question. Father still had his hand extended in the grand gesture.

"What does it mean, Father? Who's getting crucified?"

He told me that these were great words, words I should remember all my life, for they were spoken by a great man, and that great man was going to be the *Telegraph's* candidate. With quick strokes, he painted a picture of our man. I sat frog-eyed at his feet, transported to a flag-decked convention hall in Chicago, watching a 36-year-old Nebraska lawyer work his wizardry on the delegates. I heard the organ-like voice vibrating in every box and balcony:

A cause as holy as the cause of humanity . . .

I squeezed back the tears when he dared us to burn the cities and watch the farms rebuild them. I was on my feet the minute he finished, joining in the surging chant: *Bryan! Bryan! No Crown of Thorns! No Cross of Gold!* And when they nominated him on the fifth ballot, I helped tear down the Bland banners and placards and took my place in the wild procession that was circling the hall.

William Jennings Bryan! What a monumental name. I repeated it to myself over and over that night. It was better than I had ever hoped for. He sounded more important than the others . . . with his three names, and him a Westerner. He was my man. We were in it together, to the end.

Every day I went down to the print shop to help Henry and Father write the editorials. We almost ran out of adjectives. It was "Bryan, the Mirror of Jefferson," or "The Image of Lincoln," or even "The Second Coming of Washington." At home, across the checkerboard from Father, I always swung the conversation back to Bryan. I never enjoyed playing checkers with Father, it was so one-sided; but no matter now. In the yard, as I lost round after round in the horseshoe pit, we composed new

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headlines about The Great Commoner. Rambling through the woods with the political genius of the Hudson in search of quail or rabbit, I could think of nothing but William Jennings Bryan.

When school bells echoed across the autumn countryside, I became the Horace Greeley of the noon-hour recess, proselytizing my chums with refrains from Father's best copy.

Miss Prunella Easton, the village schoolmistress, soon convinced me that political science was not part of the turn-of-the-century curriculum. She raised what was left of her cracking voice, summoned a half-candlepower gleam into her faded eyes, and concluded the afternoon history session with: "Yes, children, I want you always to remember: *Thomas Jefferson* was the greatest exponent of democracy."

I didn't know for sure what "exponent" meant, but the word trampled my heart. My hand shot defiantly into the air.

"You're wrong, Miss Easton," I challenged. "My father says William Jennings Bryan is the greatest . . . eh . . . of democracy."

Silence settled over the room like chalk dust sinking in the last rays of the afternoon sun. I could almost hear the Hudson murmuring through the hills. Miss Easton's forehead quivered for a long time, as if someone were drawing a violin bow across it. When she spoke, it was in a rage-choked whisper. "Your Father, Master Corbett, like all newspaper people, is given to exaggeration. A study of history would prove profitable to him — and more so to you. The opportunity will be given you this afternoon. You may stay after school."

It was already dark when I made my way home, confused by the knowledge that there were some people who did not agree with everything Father said. I gazed across the Hudson where the new moon was paving a silver highway. The gas lights of Poughkeepsie and Beacon glowed reassuringly. Maybe Miss Easton didn't think so, but Putnam and Dutchess would prove Father right.

The incident was forgotten in the excitement that swept over me during supper. Father balanced six or seven peas deftly on his knife and said with no emotion.

"Bryan winds up his 18,000-mile tour in Boston next week. He's going to spend a few days with us here in Newburgh before the final speech. He has accepted my invitation to stay at our house for a complete rest so he'll be in good voice for the wind-up."

Mother gasped, but the sudden announcement had caught her completely off-guard. She managed to marshal a few feeble objections about where we were going to put him and what we were going to feed him, but Father and I launched a quick counter-attack that routed her.

The few days before his arrival were like the week before Christmas. Mother had the guest-room done over in a rusty gold pattern that featured Renaissance ladies bowing to

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Edwardian dandies. A fresh supply of cigars and chocolates arrived by boat from New York. The *Telegraph* began to serialize Bryan's life story, but made it clear that the candidate would not make any speeches, since he was coming for a rest.

The Great Commoner asked not to be met at the station, and his wishes were respected. None of us left the house. I think he must have stood on the porch timing himself, because exactly at 7, as the cuckoo jumped out of the wall clock, the doorbell rang.

I made it from the top floor to the vestibule without touching a single carpeted step. Mother and Father were already shaking hands. I studied the handsome face, waiting for the famous lips to move. Finally they did, and they played a masterful symphony. His words echoed through the paneled rooms, danced up the Victorian staircase, shook the somber tintypes on the walls, and floated out across the dimming landscape.

"Hello, folks," he said.

That evening I reached my peak in Darien, and I know I shall never stand there again. Time has robbed me of the innocence that made the scene memorable. I sneered when the conversation turned to Mark Hanna and William McKinley. I glowed when there was a mention of Putnam, Orange or Dutchess, and I nodded reverently when Bryan reviewed the virtues of free silver. Father was at his best. In his spanking new checkered waistcoat and black string tie he looked every inch the learned editor and agile sportsman. His eyes in the setting of his ruddy complexion sparkled like Tiffany diamonds on a red velvet cloth.

Supper over, Father slapped shut the cover on his cigar box and jovially called for the checkerboard. He was determined that the Democratic nominee should relax.

I know now that this was a decisive moment in American history, but as I stood behind Father's chair I had no premonition that our national destiny was being altered.

Suddenly, it happened. Bryan's hand bounded across the board in triumph, deep into Father's territory. Four red kings lost their thrones in that terrible moment, and who knows what other empires fell?

Bryan rose cheerfully. "Well, Corbett," he consoled. "You almost had me there for a minute — till I saw your—left—corner was vulnerable. Watch that; I get stuck there myself now and then. Well, early to bed, they say. Good night, all!"

If Father had died there and then, he would have been embalmed with the most vicious scowl in any mortician's experience. He didn't change the expression for almost three full minutes. I tiptoed up to his chair, thinking that if I told him what I had said to Miss Easton last week it might take his mind off the disaster. I underestimated his humiliation. He glared at me and roared, "Miss Easton is a clever female. That's what I pay the school tax for. See that you mind her in the future. Now go up-

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stairs and read about Jefferson in the encyclopedia!"

The only child is usually sensitive, and I was no exception. I fell asleep on a tear-soaked pillow, praying that the dawn would never come.

But come it did, full of sound and fury, signifying horseshoes. Father was in the pit at 5 in the morning! From my vantage point behind the curtains I watched him pitching back and forth. Soon Bryan appeared in the doorway and they exchanged greetings. A game was arranged. They went down to the far peg, where Bryan began rubbing his feet in the dirt, like a trapeze artist getting ready for a high swing. He picked up one of the shoes and casually tossed it. The black parabola spiraled gracefully through the soft morning light and gripped the stake with an authoritative clang. The Nebraska Senator didn't bother to watch. He was busy picking up the next shoe. With the same nonchalance he flipped through the rest of the game, managing all ringers except for one leaner. I watched Father's face-muscles convulse until he resembled a man trying to swallow a potato whole. He played well, but it just wasn't his day. "A touch of the old arthritis," he mumbled, as they returned to the house.

Bryan ate breakfast alone. Mother's waffles seemed to put the right edge on the day for him. He laughed and joked and told me stories about his boyhood on the Platte. In reply to my question, he told me that Father wasn't feeling well. "A cold or something. This November air can be mean."

Passing through the orchard on my way to school, I was startled to see Father appear from behind one of the apple trees. "I want you to stop off at the shop," he said hurriedly, "and tell Henry there'll be a little revision in make-up today. Have him change the caption on the Bryan serial from 'Our Most Illustrious American' to 'One of Our Prominent Americans'."

"Why, Father?" I asked. "He *is* our most illustrious American, isn't he?"

"Never mind what he is!" boomed Father. "Just do what you're told."

When I returned home, the house was unusually quiet. Three fat cottontails were stretched out on the kitchen sink, ready to be skinned. Bryan was in the living room going through some papers.

"Seen Father, Sir?" I asked.

"Went upstairs a while ago. Croup's got him. Said he'd sleep it off."

"Oh. You've been trying our woods, Sir, I see."

"Yes, your Dad and I had a go at it this afternoon. I bagged those three on the table there. Almost had ourselves a dandy buck . . . most beautiful thing I ever saw . . . all silver. Your father had some trouble with the sights on his new rifle, and I couldn't maneuver into position for a crack at it. Sure was a beaut, though!"

Upstairs, I found Father exploding sullen smoke rings. When he saw me he attempted a smile, but his face refused to carve it out. "My boy,"

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he said, "childhood is full of surprises. You're going to get one tonight. But first, I'd like you to go down to the print shop. I know it's late, but this is special. Tell Henry there'll be another small change or two. Have him drop that editorial on the proposed Bryan statue and substitute the one about the increased danger from clover bloat. Also cut that standing picture of the Senator and run it portrait size."

Courage welled up. "Father," I stammered, "don't you think you're making a mistake?"

"Mistake!" He shot upright in the chair. "Are you questioning my judgment at your age?"

The courage was fleeting. "No, Father," I said meekly, and I started for the village. My eyes were so glassy I hardly noticed the snow that was falling in huge blotches and swirling into drifts along the roadside. Henry made the changes without comment or concern. Twenty years with Father had left him impervious to surprises.

When I got home, Father signaled me into the library with elaborate gestures that directed me to close the door. "Shhhhh," he whispered. "Put on your mackinaw and get out the new rifles. I saw a honey of a buck today, silver as a new dollar. We're going after him. Now hurry!"

It was the first time he had ever offered to take me hunting at night, and I was overjoyed.

"Yippee," I cried. "I'll go up and tell Mr. Bryan — "

"Dad blame it all! *No!*" Father rocked the silence with his roar. Then, seeing my amazement, he covered up. "That is . . . well, you see . . . Senator Bryan is going away tomorrow and we want him to have a good rest, don't we? Shhh. Hurry now, meet me at the barn."

The night was still and clear. As we crunched our way over the hill, we looked into the valley and saw a fairyland of gleaming toy houses strung along the shore of the Hudson. The snow had stopped falling now, and everything was hushed and white. In the moonbright groves behind the north pasture, the trees all wore long white opera gloves and the bushes fluffy white perukes. Father strode merrily onward, growing more cheerful the farther we got from the house. "I saw that buck down in the hollow this afternoon," he laughed. "We'll just circle down to the creek and let him come to us."

The creek was frozen solid. We took up ambush behind a cluster of snowy birches and waited for what seemed a very long time. I was just nodding off to sleep when Father tapped me excitedly. "Look! Up the creek a little ways."

There, kicking his hoofs into the ice, was the most beautiful animal I had ever seen. In the brilliance of the moonlight his pelt glowed like an antique silver candelabra, and his massive horns might have been the proud possession of a caribou. The graceful stance, head erect, long legs poised . . . Father raised his rifle,

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took careful aim, and squeezed. Two shots rang out at almost the same instant—so close together, they might have been one. The stag toppled over onto the glassy surface with a soft thud.

"Did you shoot, too?" Father asked. Before I had a chance to say no, a gaunt form rose from the bushes a little below us, on the same side of the stream. Father grabbed my hand and pulled me across the slippery surface.

Senator Bryan greeted us warmly.

"Hello, there! Marvelous night. What do you think of my baby? She's a dandy, isn't she?"

Father gripped his rifle. "*Your* baby! What do you mean, your baby? I just bagged her. Ask my son here."

Bryan smiled. "Now look here, my good man, jest is jest. But you can see this is no ordinary quadruped. It is known the world over for its keenness of perception and swiftness of foot. None but a master at stalking and marksmanship could add this specimen of *Cervus elaphus* to his trophies . . ."

Father may not have been eloquent, but he was to the point. "You're a blasted liar," he said.

A major crisis was developing when I noticed a twin trickle of blood on the animal's back. "Look!" I cried. "You both shot him." They examined the carcass in silence. More arguing ensued. Neither man was interested in the meat. Both wanted the head and horns. Father had visions of it leering down from the library wall, and Bryan must have had similar dreams about his Nebraska ranch house. Finally the Senator dug into his pocket and produced a nickel.

"Come Corbett," he offered, "let's not show tempers in front of the child. We'll toss for it. Call!" He flipped the coin into the air as Father scowled.

"Tails."

It landed without a tinkle in a ruffle of snow edging the ice. "Tails!" I shrieked. "You win, Father. It's yours."

Bryan was a gracious loser. "There, Corbett. That settles it. You have yourself a fine piece of deer and I'll bet it'll look like a million dollars when stuffed. Say, there's an idea. I know just the man up the Boston who could knock your eyes out with a job like that. Why not let me take it along with me tomorrow? It's the least I can do in return for your hospitality. Nothing like getting a professional to do it when you have a prize like this."

The next morning we were on the porch bidding our celebrated guest goodbye and good luck. He had the stag on the back seat of the surrey we had hired to take him to the station. We watched the great horns disappear down the white road. Father seemed very pleased with himself. "Wave, boy. Wave," he boomed. "There goes our greatest exponent of democracy!"

"Including Jefferson?" I asked.

"When I say greatest, I mean greatest!"

And for the next few days, he

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meant it. The *Telegraph* went back to its old policy of front-page editorials on the Democrats and free silver. William Jennings Bryan smiled from every issue, and Father was his old self again. That is, until the Wells, Fargo delivery wagon drove up to our front door.

We were at breakfast and Father went to the door humming "The Minstrel Boy." He hummed all the way into the library behind the two men carrying the huge box, and he hummed to the accompaniment of rattling paper when they left. But suddenly, halfway through the chorus, the humming stopped. A door slammed, a gigantic oath rumbled through the house. After a long time Father came back to the table. Every muscle in his body was quaking. His face had a peculiar yellowish pallor, like cheese, and his eyes were wild.

"What did the men bring?" I foolishly ventured.

"Shut up!" he said.

Mother chided him about slang. "You should say 'be silent,' " she corrected him. She believed in attacking a problem semantically. Father growled something into his porridge that sounded a good deal worse than shut up. I hurried off to school.

During history period I heard the newsboys singing in the streets. We never put out a paper on Wednesday, but Miss Easton went to the door and came back with a *Telegraph*. She scanned it quickly and then unfolded it for the class. Banner headlines proclaimed: "*WILLIAM MCKINLEY FOR PRESIDENT!*"

"I see, Master Corbett," she said with the wryest smile her mixture of gold and absent teeth would allow, "that your Father has been reading a little history after all."

When school let out I dashed home and burst into Father's room, exploding the papers from his desk in the draft created by my quick entrance. "Father!" I shouted. "Have you seen what's happened? The Republicans have put out a rival *Telegraph!* We've got to do something. It's all over town!"

"What's this all about, son?" he said, picking up the scattered papers with a sigh of exhausted patience. "I don't know where you get your imagination. It must be from your Mother. I put out that issue this afternoon. We're going to put William McKinley in the White House. You and I. Now run along and play. I have to call Mark Hanna in Cleveland about tonight's rally."

"Mark Hanna!" the words rang like profanity. "After what you called him in yesterday's editorial? You can't do that, Father. You can't change now! Not two weeks before election!"

Amusement twinkled in his eyes. "Son," he smiled, "some day you'll learn you can do just about anything in politics. You don't even have to have a reason for it. In fact, it's better if you don't, then they can't attack your motives. Now why don't you go out in the yard and get ready for the

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parade in Poughkeepsie? We'll be leaving soon. There's an old hoe-handle in the shed and you can make yourself a dandy torch . . ."

That night I marched behind a forest of Republican banners to the music of the Dutchess County Brass Band. My torch gave a sickly light. It was made for William Jennings Bryan and it would never glow for anyone else. But Poughkeepsie knew no such loyalties. The town was in a howling ecstasy. All evening long I fought off nausea. Deep down inside, idols were being smashed and illusions shattered. I felt alone in the world and cheated of something I held dear. I regret that I have never felt that way since about anything. My youth and innocence passed down the street that night, swept into the gutter with the confetti and the ticker tape.

Beacon and Newburgh repeated the performance. Members of the present generation can little visualize what a turn-of-the-century election parade was like — the flags, the bands, the free beer served in frozen schooners, the gaily decorated floats, the ah's and oh's when the fireworks went off. Orange, Putnam and Dutchess went mad for the Republicans. They stood pat behind Father and the *Telegraph*.

On election night we went down to the West Shore station to hear the results come in over the Morse clicker. Mother had a Victorian skepticism toward all things electrical. She called this one the "What Hath God Wroughter," safely relegating it to the world of metaphysics. She kept her distance from it and gasped every time it began its spasmodic cough. The results were as expected. Orange, Putnam and Dutchess had a Republican landslide; McKinley carried every precinct.

The next morning we heard the statewide count. Bryan lost New York by less than 4,000 votes. Our three counties had voted 7,900 for McKinley. On Friday Father ran the complete national returns. McKinley was twenty-fifth President of the United States, with a plurality in the Electoral College of 31 votes. New York was then worth 36 votes. Had Father remained loyal to Bryan, the Nebraskan would have won by five electoral votes. It is a quirk of history, but three little counties, Orange, Putnam and Dutchess, had elected the President of the United States!

When Father cast his lot with McKinley he destroyed something in me. I became chronically suspicious and took my fellow man with a grain of distrust — even Father.

Long before inauguration day, I found the explanation of the sudden switch.

I waited one Saturday morning until Father disappeared down the road to town and Mother left with her basket for the henhouse. Cautiously I stole around behind the house. The library window was unlocked. I raised it wide enough to crawl in. The new rifles wrapped in a blanket and stuffed behind the couch gave me the clue I was looking for. I found the

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key to the gun closet hanging inside the grandfather clock. The huge package filled the cabinet. I dragged it to the center of the floor and carefully undid the bindings. It contained the work of the Boston taxidermist.

I often wish that I had not given it away when we gave up the old house. Some museum or historical society would have been glad to add the specimen to their Americana archives. The package contained one of the most curious things ever shipped and crated . . . curious enough to elect a President.

There on the floor before me stretched the stuffed hind quarters of a deer, complete with two long legs and glossy buttocks. A white slip of paper was pinned to the nub of a tail. It read:

Tails is what you cried, Corbett,
And tails is what you get.
Happy hunting!

W. J. B.

The extraordinary charm of Mr. Mulligan's tale certainly does not arise from its devotion to history. Father may always have been right; if so, little Hugh's gene of accuracy must be traced back to other hereditary sources.

The number of historical lapses in Mr. Mulligan's memory is so formidable as to inspire awe. He says, for example, that in the Presidential election of 1896 Bryan "lost New York (State) by less than 4000 votes." Mr. Mulligan, it is our editorial duty to point out that Bryan lost New York State to McKinley that year by over 268,000 votes. Again, as Mr. Mulligan recalls it, McKinley's margin over Bryan in the Electoral College was 31 votes. The record, Mr. Mulligan: McKinley, 271 votes, Bryan 176 — a margin of 95. So, had Father remained loyal to Bryan and delivered New York's 36 electoral votes to The Great Commoner, Bryan would not have won by 5 electoral votes, as Mr. Mulligan says, he would still have lost by 59.

And again: In July Father "left to attend the Republican and Democratic national conventions." He must have been a little late, Mr. Mulligan, at least for the Republican convention, because the Republican convention which nominated William McKinley in 1896 took place in June. How unreliable boyish recollections can be!

And then, that touching scene in which the great Nebraskan, comfortably full of Mother's breakfast waffles, "laughed and joked and told me stories about his boyhood on the Platte." Shame on William Jennings

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Bryan, Mr. Mulligan. He was born and brought up in Illinois, and he did not move to Nebraska and the Platte country until he was seventeen years old!

Mr. Mulligan also refers, with proper respect, to the hero of his boyhood as "Senator Bryan." Mr. Mulligan, in 1896 Senator Bryan was not a Senator. It is true that he had been a Representative to Congress; it is even true that he ran for the U. S. Senate in 1894, but he was soundly licked on that occasion. Not only had Mr. Bryan never been a Senator, he was never to be a Senator. What's more, in the rest of his 30 years of public life after his defeat in 1896, William Jennings Bryan was not to hold a single elective office. At the time you met him, Mr. Mulligan, he was simply the editor of the Omaha World Herald.

Oh, yes. And that deer that caused all the ruckus — "Cervus elaphus," *as Mr. Bryan called it. Somebody was wrong, Mr. Mulligan. According to our sources,* Cervus elaphus *is the taxonomic term for a kind of deer which is found only in Europe, Asia, and Africa.*

In fact, Mr. Mulligan, are you sure any of this happened at all?

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EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

THE SILENT WOMEN *by MARGARET PAGE HOOD* (COWARD-MCCANN, $2.75)	". . . evidence is beautifully handled . . . island is unforgettable . . . vividly regional . . ." (AB)	"More scenery than suspense . . . agreeable enough. Atmospheric." (AdV)
DEATH AND THE SKY ABOVE *by ANDREW GARVE* (HARPER, $2.75)	"The last section is weakest . . . first two parts are . . . wholly admirable . . ." (AB)	"Pace tense most of way . . . dénouement is letdown." (SC)
THE LONG GOODBYE *by RAYMOND CHANDLER* (HOUGHTON-MIFFLIN, $3)	". . . amazingly ramified plot is managed with awesome skill." (AdV)	"Usual excellent job by standout performer; perhaps his best." (SC)
SHROUD OF DARKNESS *by E. C. R. LORAC* (CRIME CLUB, $2.75)	". . . furnishing Chief Inspector Macdonald one of his finest cases." (DBH)	"Treatment convincing, intelligent, all the way; pace swift." (SC)
UNFINISHED CRIME *by HELEN McCLOY* (RANDOM, $2.75)	"A pleasant story in Helen McCloy's well known cameo style." (FC)	". . . as exciting as any which Miss McCloy has written." (DBH)
THE BURNING FUSE *by BEN BENSON* (MILL-MORROW, $2.75)	". . . a compact story of strong dramatic tension." (AB)	"Begins with good gimmick . . . Holds up remarkably well . . . Cold sweat." (AdV)
THE GLASS VILLAGE *by ELLERY QUEEN* (LITTLE, BROWN, $3.50)	"Consistently interesting . . . fans will not want to miss this one." (AD)	". . . a story to be placed with Queen's major novel, CAT OF MANY TAILS . . ." (DBH)

AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times*

FC: *Frances Crane in the Evansville Press*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review*

AD: *August Derleth in the Madison Capital-Times*

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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key at bottom gives sources.

RUN, KILLER, RUN *by WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT* (DUTTON, $2.75)	". . . just another routine, medium-hardboiled suspense novel . . ." (AB)	". . . a quickie from Gault, who has done much better stories." (DBH)
DON'T HANG ME TOO HIGH *by J. B. O'SULLIVAN* (MILL-MORROW, $2.75)	"Descriptive language with tough, sexy style . . ." (FC)	". . . turgid yarn. Bumpy." (SC)
THE CASE OF THE SEVEN OF CALVARY *by ANTHONY BOUCHER* (MACMILLAN, $2.50)	". . . intellectually stimulating and quite unguessable. Thanks." (AdV)	". . . quality of wit and precision plotting . . . all thoroughly admirable. (LGO)
PERILOUS JOURNEYS OF HERCULE POIROT *by AGATHA CHRISTIE* (DODD, MEAD, $3.50)	". . . welcome revivals of the simon-pure detective story at its most masterly." (AB)	"Good for new readers and veterans alike." (LGO)
BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR — 1954 *Edited by DAVID C. COOKE* (DUTTON, $2.95)	". . . readable and admirably competent short stories . . ." (AB)	". . . dozen good yarns . . . Choice collection." (SC)
BUTCHER, BAKER, MURDER-MAKER *Edited by GEORGE HARMON COXE* (KNOPF, $3.50)	". . . fifth annual series by The Mystery Writers of America . . . steadily interesting. Good value." (AdV)	". . . unusual short mysteries and the authors include most of the top flight names . . ." (H-M)
ELLERY QUEEN'S AWARDS *Edited by ELLERY QUEEN* (LITTLE, BROWN, $3)	". . . a first rate collection . . . brilliantly varied." (AdV)	"Fine selection, fine performance, as usual. Aces up." (SC)

H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Fairfield County Fair*

DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in the Albuquerque Tribune*

LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*

AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

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A slambang thriller from one of the top action writers of our time

INVITATION TO SUDDEN DEATH

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

HE WAS ON LATE DUTY THAT week, which was why his face was so long as he came down the steps of the precinct house in the middle of all his shift-mates a quarter of an hour before midnight. He hated that late racket — couldn't get used to it. Midnight to 8:00 A.M. The dregs of time. You had to sleep in broad daylight — try to, anyway, where he lived. Loaf around all afternoon when other people worked. Didn't know whether to call it breakfast he ate before he reported in at 11:30 P.M., or midnight-lunch or what.

And such a totally forsaken beat: Lincoln to Main, Halsted to Spring. Trying store fronts to make sure they were locked up. Picking them up and putting them down. Ringing in twice an hour. Then you came off, went home to bed when the rest of the world was waking up. Got up at noon and the whole thing started over once more.

"Cheer up," Dinty Falvey said at his elbow, "think of all the nice fresh air you get."

"Every dog has his day," Danny O'Dare answered. "I'll be having mine — one of these fine nights!"

They formed a double column on the sidewalk, tramping along two by two. Not in drill formation by any means, just roughly symmetrical, to avoid ganging up. The two green lamps dwindled to the size of peas behind them, lost themselves in the night-murk. They started thinning out, dropping off one by one to relieve the men going off duty. O'Dare's beat was the farthest out of them all. "S'long, Danny, see you tomorrow!"

"Right," said Danny O'Dare, and went on alone. Just a cop. Just a cog in a machine. He reached his beat, opened the call-box, and phoned in:

"O'Dare taking over, corner of Lincoln and Rogers."

Keefer, the man he was relieving, had a drunk on his hands. A drunk and a taxi-driver and an accusing meter. One of the pesty kind of drunks who persecute cops. It's that way more often than not, public belief to the contrary. A cop loathes running in a drunk, will lean over backward if he can possibly avoid it. For one thing, they're rarely held the next day, unless they've done something particularly bad. For another, it takes up the cop's time; he's got to appear to press the charge. It's a nuisance.

Keefer had a disgusted air, as

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though this had been going on a good ten minutes or more. "C'mon now," he said wearily, "which pocket did you put it in? It must be in there somewhere! Give the man his money."

The drunk, legs splayed, hat teetering on the back of his head, was digging a thumb into a vest-pocket with somnambulistic slowness. Three or four other pockets had their linings turned inside out. The taxi-driver sat by at his wheel, mum as a clam, aware that the gentry in dark-blue have no great love for his kind either.

The drunk pulled the exploring thumb out, smote himself a devastating blow on the chest, bellowed indignantly: "I been robbed!" The dramatic emphasis was too much; he went off balance, sat down abruptly from the effect of his own Tarzan-wallop.

"I got a better idea," said O'Dare quietly. He picked him up by the feet instead of the collar, held his legs straight up in the air. "Catch his head so it don't bump," he warned his brother-officer. "Now, shake!" The drunk began to vibrate like someone with the palsy. Something chinked musically to the sidewalk under him, something else followed.

"Holding out, huh?" Keefer said with feigned ferocity as they stood him up. "I oughta run you in!"

The drunk heaved with exaggerated dignity. "Never wash so insulted in my life!" he glowered.

"Now pay the man and get outa here, before I haul you in!" Keefer then took a threatening step forward. The drunk scurried around the corner as though he were worked on pulleys. When Keefer turned to the cab-driver, however, his truculence was no longer assumed, it was the real thing. "Now y' got paid, get out o' here, gyp-artist! Y'oughta know better than to take on a drunk in the first place!"

The driver, meek as a lamb, released his brake and glided away without a word.

"What's new?" O'Dare asked when they were alone.

Keefer jerked his head despondently after the disappearing tail-light. "That's all I ever get. And I hadda get somebody's pet cat out of a flue at 40 Spring a while ago. I'd almost be willing to trade places with either of those guys." Which wasn't exactly true, and wasn't meant to be taken as such. O'Dare understood. Blowing off steam, they called it.

"Well, be good, Danny — see you t'morra."

"Yep." The footfalls died away. The night silence descended, unbroken blocks of it, an occasional machine in the distance, a trolley taking a curve in high-C. . . . The quiet of a sleeping city, that for complete suspension beats any country quiet all hollow.

Danny O'Dare was on duty.

He started down Lincoln, in and out of the store entrys, testing the locks, peering through the glass fronts. He got to the other end of his beat, turned right, followed that street. A window was thrown up high above him, a window that showed black directly over one that showed orange. A

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lady of uncertain years thrust her head out, exclaimed with shattering audibility: "There's one now! Officer, officer — will you come up here, please?"

He knew right away it wasn't going to be important; a cop can tell about those things. She wasn't frightened, just sore. "What's the trouble, lady?"

"I want those people under me arrested! They keep playing their radio until all hours of the night. It's an outrage!"

"Sh, quiet, lady!" O'Dare reminded her. "You're making more noise than any radio yourself right this minute."

He sighed, went into the building, climbed two flights of stairs, knocked on a door. You could hardly hear it; she probably had a grudge. He liked the people at a glance, screwed up the side of his face good-naturedly. "Just tone it down a little," he advised. They offered him a drink. "I'll hold you to that when I'm off duty," he grinned, went down to the street again. A clock chimed the half hour and he rang in from the call-box at the next intersection. "O'Dare, 25th and Main, nothing to report."

And then right away, as though to give him the lie, there was.

It didn't seem like anything at first glance. Just a car parked half way down one of the side streets, lights out. For all the life it showed, it might have been there all night. No violation in that. It wasn't on the main thoroughfare, wasn't near a hydrant. If its owner lived in that building, he had a perfect right to leave it out all night instead of bedding it at a garage.

But, somehow, it didn't blend with its surroundings, with the building it was standing in front of, with the neighborhood as a whole. Even in the dimness, it was too high-class, too expensive a job, to look right hanging around here any length of time. It would have been more in keeping with Heinie Muller's beat, over around Rivercrest Heights.

Now, Danny O'Dare was no swami, but it's a fact that cops have a definite instinct about that sort of thing, maybe even without realizing it. Just as he had known that that lady-crank had had nothing worth saying to him out of the window, something about this car struck him as not being quite as guileless as it seemed.

He had been in full sight of it when he rang the precinct house just now from the corner. Had only spotted it as he finished closing the call-box. Some sort of a tension got to him from it, as he looked down toward it from where he was. As though somebody, either in it or nearby, were holding his breath, waiting to see what his next move would be.

He continued on the way he'd been heading, crossed the mouth of the side street and passed from view behind the opposite corner. Then he stopped, got up close to it, and stuck about half of one eye out beyond the building line. He could have been dead wrong. It could have belonged to a swell who had a wren tucked away in this part of town. Its presence could have been explained by any one of

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half a dozen reasons that were none of Danny O'Dare's business. Then, while he hinged like that, a portion of a door-way shadow detached itself and came farther out into the open, became the outline of a man who had been watching O'Dare — and now wanted to make sure *he* had gone! O'Dare drew that tiny sliver of his head back, paying out a little more rope, as it were.

The silhouette went over to the car; a brief, almost unnoticeable blat of its horn sounded. *Pip!* — like that. Not just a signal of impatience — too short and quick for that; but a warning signal for somebody unseen inside the building.

It was O'Dare's meat now. He had been the cause of that warning, and anyone who's afraid of a cop must have some good reason for being afraid of a cop.

The set-up was a particularly bad one; he realized it as he breasted the corner, came into full sight, and headed down on that car and its look-out. An ordinary man would have thought twice about bucking it, and then not bucked it. Which is why cops wear blue uniforms to distinguish them from ordinary men. He and the car and the street-light across the way formed a triangle. As he advanced, the street-light fell behind him. He had half a block to cover as a looming silhouette, silver radiance behind him, a target that a blind man could hit. They — the car and its watchers — stayed safely shrouded in gloom. They could stop him long before he got there and he couldn't do a thing about it, wasn't even entitled to fire first until he was given provocation. Tension had switched over to him now, had hold of every nerve. He thought of Molly, waiting at home, alone, helpless, going to present him with a Danny O'Dare, Junior one of these fine days. Thought, but that was all. He didn't even try to protect himself by feigning casualness as he bore down. He wasn't using his beat-gait, was coming on at the quick pace of aroused suspicions.

Halfway to it now. The look-out had got in the car long ago, when Danny first revealed himself around the corner. But the door stayed invitingly open — like an invitation to sudden death. Metal glinted momentarily behind the glass above the dash, high-lighted by the rays of the street-light far behind O'Dare. You couldn't even see the guy's face, just that warning glint of deadly steel.

O'Dare had partially unlimbered himself — though the act was begging for the death-flash that was to come — with his hand to his hip-bone. The odds, climbing as high against him as they could possibly have gone, now suddenly began to drop down in his favor. He was in close now where he could do some damage himself; the guy had waited too long to drop him.

The car's gleaming bumper flashed past behind him and he was up to the door. The guy's face came into focus — and a little round knob pierced by a hole sighted over the top of that door into the middle of O'Dare's

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stomach. He was going to take him the hard way.

"Can it, Detroit!" a commanding voice cried warningly from the doorway, "I'll handle it!"

The round knob with the black hole vanished. The glimmer of a white face under the car-ceiling went "S-s-s!" through puckered lips and pinched nostrils, like something letting off steam through a safety-valve. That's very bad for a killer's nerves, to be at firing-point and then be checked abruptly. Fiction writers like to say that killers haven't any nerves. It's really just the other way around; they're all nerves. O'Dare whirled, careless of whether he got it in the back or not.

Two men were hurrying out of the doorway, across the sidewalk to the pulsing car. O'Dare drew first, looked second to see if there was menace coming from that direction. There wasn't, at least not on the surface. The one in advance was stocky, short, and he matched the car. Sleek, glossy, important-looking. Fleecy vicuna coat with big headlight pearl-buttons flapping open as he strove to get there before anything regrettable happened. Furious, apparently, that it so very nearly had. Or maybe for other reasons that O'Dare hadn't divined yet, having to do with his own happening along just when he had. At any rate, this sleek pudge had his brakes off for a moment, spoke without thinking — as though O'Dare weren't present.

"Never one of *them!*" he barked hoarsely. "Don't you know any better than that? Never one of *them!*" He reached the open door of the car, swung a short right hook in under the low-slung roof. The impact sounded as it hit the dim face lurking below. *Whock!* "There's never anything that can't be straightened out if you use your head!" the sleek one raged on.

It was now O'Dare's turn. He saw that no one else was coming out of the doorway. Neither of the two new arrivals made the slightest threat toward him. The second man, less conspicuously dressed than the shorter one, stayed in the background, lighting a cigarette with four hands — the way they shook he seemed to have at least that many. But O'Dare wasn't forgeting that surreptitious gleam of metal behind the windshield, that bored knob atop the door. "Put up your hands!" he rasped into the car. "Step out here where I can get a look at you, and identify yourself! What was that you had sighted on me just now when I was coming up? Where is it?" His own gun was in the open now; not exactly pointed, but just there, ready.

The man in the vicuna coat spoke, as though that were a short-cut out of an unpleasant misunderstanding. "He's my driver, brother, that's all," he explained blandly. "His name is Emmons, we call him Detroit because he comes from —"

O'Dare cut him short: "I didn't ask you, I asked him!" The man had stepped out, palms up like somebody carrying a cafeteria tray. He glanced at Vicuna-Coat quizzically, as though

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asking: "Why don't you stop this cop's foolishness?"

Vicuna-Coat seemed to think it was about time to. "I'm Benny Benuto," he said softly, and waited for that to sink in.

It didn't seem to. O'Dare didn't even flick his eyes over at him; he kept them on the driver. "Where is it?" he growled. He missed seeing the brief pantomime. The second man gave Benuto a brief, inquiring look, hand idly fingering the lapel of his coat within grabbing distance of his own left shoulder. The look might have meant: "Want me to give it to him? He's holding us up." Benuto answered with a negative shake of the head, a contemptuous curl of the lip, as though: "What, this harness cop? Leave him to me!"

He said aloud to O'Dare, "You don't seem to understand, brother. I said I'm Benny Benuto."

Again O'Dare didn't hear, apparently. The driver had handed over the gun, a brutal-looking thing all steel and a yard wide. O'Dare pocketed it. "License?" he snapped.

Benuto cut in reassuringly, "He's got one, brother. I wouldn't let him carry it if he —"

"He better have!"

He did. O'Dare scanned it by the light of the dash, which he had ordered cut on. All jake, nothing phony about it. He jabbed it back to him reluctantly.

Benuto was soaping him, "You see, he's a sort of bodyguard of mine as well as driver, a little fidgety like all such guys are. Must have mistook you for some kind of footpad in the dark and —"

O'Dare now gave him his undivided attention. If he'd placed him, you wouldn't have known it by any change in his voice or manner, any creep-in of deference. "The corner light was on me the whole way up," he said tersely. "He saw me at the call-box even before that! I take it you don't live here, Mr. Benuto? You can explain your presence in this building at this hour, can you?"

Benuto seemed to be trying hard to control himself. "Would you mind giving me your name, officer?"

"Answer my question!" O'Dare yelled loudly in his face. "I don't care who you are, if you're the biggest bigshot in town!"

"Oh, then you *do* know who I am." Benuto smiled a little dangerously. "That should make it much simpler. Sure, glad to answer your question, Officer 4432." He repeated the numerals on O'Dare's shield aloud. The other man in the background was scribbling them down. "I just dropped in to visit an old friend. Well, I found out he doesn't live here any more —"

O'Dare's eyes involuntarily went up the face of the house. It was changing while he looked. A whole half floor went suddenly orange, or rather the windows did. A minute later the other half followed suit. Then the one below. It was waking up from top to bottom. One of the sashes went up and a frightened-looking young woman peered down at the group by the car.

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She seemed about to say something, when abruptly a man standing behind her in the room clapped his hand to her mouth, pulled her in again. His voice carried down to the sidewalk just before he slammed the sash down again: "Stay out of it! What's matter wit' yuh? Wanna get in trouble?"

A woman suddenly appeared in the street doorway, distracted, dazed, staggering, clad only in her nightdress, blood down the front of it. "Johnny!" she was groaning, hands pressed to her forehead. "Johnny! What've they done to you?"

O'Dare took a step toward her. A steely grip suddenly shot out, held him fast by the upper arm. "I wanna talk to you!" All the suavity was gone from Benuto. He meant business.

The woman had sat down on the top doorstep just as she was, hunched there, clasping her knees, rocking back and forth like some lost soul. "Johnny! I knew this would happen to you! You wouldn't listen to me! Johnny!"

Benuto's voice was a harsh whisper in O'Dare's ear. "Now, before you get any ideas in your head, listen to me, brother! Use the old bean. We heard some trouble going on in one of the apartments up there — somebody getting his from somebody. That's why we got out in a hurry. We didn't want to get mixed up in it. I *still* don't — do you get me? And here's how much I don't — step down this way." He led O'Dare a step or two to the rear of the car, just out of the line of vision of his two henchmen. "Tact" is what Benny Benuto would have called it if asked for a definition.

Danny O'Dare had never seen a thousand-dollar bill before. He saw five of them now, as they went into his uniform pocket one by one. Benuto took good care that he should, letting each one focus without blurring, yet without being too brazen about it. "Just a token of good will," he said. "You know where you can find me. Drop around tomorrow or next day, and I'll match them for you. All you gotta do is just forget I happened to be here at the same time this was happening. Everybody else is getting theirs. Get yours, brother. Be up-to-date. Your looey is a pretty good pal of mine. Maybe I can do you some good, 4432."

For the second time that night he thought of Molly and the kid they were expecting. What a lot of difference five grand can make in this world! Get his, everybody else was — Through the haze of his thoughts he heard himself saying: "There's blood on your shirt-front, Benuto. There's blood on that other guy's hand too, I saw it when he lit a butt —"

"That's from hitting my driver in the nose," Benuto said softly, "You saw me do it." He flicked the back of his hand familiarly against the pocket that held the $5,000. "You saw me do it," he repeated slowly. "Ask the jane. Call her over here and ask her — and then let me get out of this."

O'Dare had to drag her forward bodily. She kept resisting, holding

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back in mortal terror. "What happened upstairs? Who got hurt?"

She was almost incoherent with grief — and something else besides. "My Johnny! They came after him! He went to the door, I stayed in bed. They locked me in there, I heard them, I heard them doing it! Right in my arms he —" She spread out her nightdress like a pitiful child showing a mud stain. "Look."

"Who?" O'Dare said.

"Somebody. I don't know."

"Look at these two men. Was it either of these two men?" Benuto and the other one just stood there, smiling slightly.

She went nearly wild with fear, began to thresh about trying to free herself, swung all the way around O'Dare backwards until she faced the other way, straining away from him like something on a leash. "Lemme go! Lemme go, oh, please! No, I never saw them before! I don't know who it was! I tell you I don't know!"

Benuto said "See?" You could hardly hear the word, just a lisp on his tongue. He turned, took an abrupt step; the other man went with him. The car door cracked smartly. The tuned-up engine bellowed out. Benuto's voice topped it. "Be seeing you, brother!" The Isotta-Fraschini telescoped itself into a swirling red tail-light that seemed to spin concentrically as it receded.

O'Dare half raised his gun at it; held it that way at a 45-degree angle from the ground. One foot stamped forward a pace. The other wouldn't follow. $5,000. That represented weary years of pounding pavements, trying door-latches. In rain and snow and slush; in below-zero numbness and blistering dog-days. And the accrued earnings of all that plodding drudgery was his in the space of five minutes, without lifting a finger. Just by forgetting a name. A name that it wouldn't do him any good to remember, a name that counted for more than the numerals 4432 in high places. A name that could send him to a worse beat than this one even, out by the river shore where the ash heaps were. A wife home that he didn't want to watch grow ugly and old, wrestling with pots all her life. A kid coming that he wanted to be someone, to send to college some day. Who gave a rap about them, but him? Who gave a rap about him, but himself? Others were getting theirs, why shouldn't he get his? The modern way, the up-to-date way.

He ground the heel of his left hand in, above his eyes, letting go of the woman. She slumped down like a clawing, groveling animal, around O'Dare's leg. The red tail elongated into a comet, turned the corner. A prowl car passed it, going slowly the other way, and ebbed from sight.

O'Dare yanked out his whistle, gave it a blast. He put his gun away and picked the woman up with both arms. "You *do* know who did it, don't you?" he asked without looking down into her face. "You're afraid to tell!"

"Johnny!" she moaned. "Johnny!"

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Her head was hanging downwards over his elbow. "What's the difference who did it? He's gone now! *You* can't bring him back, you guy with the badge!"

The prowl car backed up, turned in, shot down toward them, stopped on a dime. The one on O'Dare's side leaned out. "There's a guy just been beaten to death in that building," O'Dare said with a jerk of his head. He carried her in without waiting, up the stairs. "Which door is it?" he panted.

The house was unnaturally still from top to bottom; light threading from under every door, floorboards creaking under tiptoed footsteps, but not a face showing outside. Self-preservation working overtime.

He set her down on her feet and she groped along the wall, wavering toward the right door. It was open, anyway.

"Those guys did it, didn't they?" he said a second time.

"Why should I tell you?" she shuddered. "Who can help me? Who? Everyone in the house must have heard him groaning, must have heard me pleading for him through that locked door. Nobody would come near us to help us. What a world this is!"

"Why didn't you scream for help?"

"I was afraid that would kill him even quicker."

He turned and went in. The lights were still on. It was pretty fierce. The assistant medical examiner's full report, later, was to be something unique in the municipal records: there was hardly an unfractured bone in the man's entire body! All the legs were off four otherwise undamaged chairs, and all sixteen of those, in turn, were broken. They must have stayed in there quite some time.

The woman kept trying to come in and he wouldn't let her. Finally, one of the neighbors got up enough courage to show up outside, took her in with him, gave her some whiskey. Her sobs, when she finally thawed, came thinly through the door — a little bit like the cat must have sounded that Keefer said he'd rescued from a flue. O'Dare thought: "I got someone loves me like that too." He touched his pocket; paper crackled.

One of the prowl-car's men was Anderson, the other was Josephs. O'Dare knew them both. "Some job," Anderson remarked. O'Dare kept looking down at what was left of the guy. Maybe it was that. The woman's mewing kept coming in. Maybe it was that. Or maybe it was that he hadn't thought quickly, clearly enough down below on the street when that red tail spurted for the corner. He blurted out: "Benny Benuto and one of his hoods were leaving just as I got to the door."

They both looked at him, looked away again. Anderson said warningly out of the corner of his mouth: "Pipe down! Are you crazy, O'Dare?" They glanced at each other understandingly. "Who are you, to buck things? D'ya want your beat shoved so far out

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y'gotta commute to get to it? D'ya want just empty pin-marks left on your coat? You're no rookie, kid. Take a tip from us and shut your yap. Don't tackle —"

Two dicks came hustling up the stairs into the room. "Whew! Hamburger!" one let out. An Inspector arrived, minutes later. O'Dare said in answer to his questioning: "I didn't hear anything, but there was a suspicious-looking car standing out front, numbered 6M58–40. A man who identified himself as Benny Benuto came running out of the house with another man just as I got up to it. There was blood on Benuto's shirt-front."

"Then why did you let him get away?" asked the Inspector.

O'Dare looked unflinchingly at him. He said slowly, "He gave me five thousand dollars to forget I'd seen him here, and jumped in the car. Here it is." He opened his hand. It held ten pieces of paper, five bills torn in half. They all fell down on the floor as he dropped his hand to his side.

The Inspector said, "Send out an alarm for Benny Benuto. He's to be picked up for questioning, on suspicion of murder, along with two other men, Detroit Emmons and Wally Furst." He pointed to the torn bills. "Pick that up and seal it in an envelope, to be presented as evidence at the arraignment — if there is one."

"If," somebody in the room piped very low.

One of the dicks murmured dryly as he brushed by O'Dare: "I wouldn't want to be in *your* shoes, cop!"

Josephs, going down the stairs with O'Dare, said: "You'll find out. He'll meet himself coming out, he'll spring so fast! He bounces like a tennis ball off a racket." When they got to the prowl car, he picked up a newspaper from the seat and handed it to him. "Better start getting familiar with the Help Wanted ads."

O'Dare said grimly: "He'll bounce like a cannon ball, once I get my two-cents worth in. The woman up there can identify him, if they'll only get it out of her. There's a man and woman on the floor below must have seen something too. She tried to —" Something started coming over the radio while they were standing there. "Calling Cars 15 and 8, Cars 15 and 8. Go to 50 Diversey Place. 50 Diversey Place. Third floor front. A woman has been reported abducted. A woman has been reported abducted. That is —"

The unintentional irony of it: "That is all!"

"Not our party," Anderson was saying.

O'Dare had hold of the car door in a funny way, as if he were drunk or had just tripped over something against the curb.

"What's matter with you?"

A peculiar hollow sound came from his chest. "I live there. That's my wife's and my — place."

"Hang on!" Josephs snapped. They swung off so quick they nearly took him off his feet along with them. He

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jumped, clung there on the running-board, crouched a little to meet the wind. Just before they skidded around the corner, two of the dicks came out of the house, bringing with them the dead man's wife and the couple from the floor below, all of whom O'Dare had indicated as possible witnesses. He wouldn't have known them at the moment if they'd stared him in the face. "Make it a mistake," he prayed in the teeth of the wind. "Not Molly!"

They screeched to a stop in front of where he'd left four hours ago, with her waving goodbye from the third-floor window. There were too many lights lit for three in the morning. The whole face of the building was blinking with them, like that other house they'd just come away from. He knew then, beyond the shadow of a doubt. Something was wrong, something had happened here. It was written all over the place to his cop's eye. One of the assigned cars was there, already ahead of them.

He jumped down and went at the door like someone stumbling off-balance, shoulders way ahead of his feet. Josephs and Anderson — who'd come out of bounds to bring him here — lit out again around the next corner. Mrs. Kramer, a floor below his, her head a mass of curl-papers, was standing in her doorway discussing it with the woman across the hall. Their voices dropped as tragedy in a blue uniform went hurtling by. But not low enough.

"That's him now. Poor soul, they were going to —"

"Did you see that look in his eye? He'll kill them if he ever —"

The two men from Car 15 were talking to the super, who had a sweater over his pajamas, just outside O'Dare's own door. Danny elbowed the two aside, grabbed the man by the shoulders, began to shake the life out of him. "How'd it happen? What'd they look like?"

The other two pried his hands away. "He don't know, he didn't see them. How can he talk anyway when you're turning him into an eggnog?"

"Say that when it happens to you, McKee." O'Dare said bitterly.

The super said, "I happened to be up, reading. I heard her call out in the hall, just once. Your name, 'Danny!' — and I thought maybe she was sick, needed help. Right down by the street door, it sounded. Time I got there, I didn't see anyone, just heard a car driving away outside, that was all."

O'Dare brushed by them, went in to look. There wasn't anything to see, but he didn't want them to see his eyes. They dried right up again, from the slow, fine rage that was beginning to set in. The super sidled up to him, sidestepping the others momentarily.

"And there was this," he whispered. "On the sill. I thought I better show it to you first, by yourself."

> Your memory played you a bad trick, didn't it, tonight? Maybe this will help it some.

O'Dare turned slowly and showed the note to the others. "Benuto did

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it." And shaking with a terrible, quiet sort of intensity, "If they bring him in tonight —!"

The Inspector who had been over at the other place arrived. "They just brought him in. I got the flash on my way over here."

"Where've they got him? Where've they got him?" O'Dare cried out wildly.

"Holding him over at one of the outlying precincts, without booking him, so his mouthpiece can't jump right in and haul him out —"

The phone started ringing in the room. The Inspector motioned to O'Dare to go ahead and answer it. "Yeah, this is Patrolman O'Dare," they heard him say.

The voice said, "It's ten minutes past 3, O'Dare. We'll give you one hour. If the gent you've framed isn't released from wherever it is he's being held by ten past 4, you know the answer, don't you?"

O'Dare said, "No, I don't —" Suddenly his face went the color of clay, and he jolted there as though the instrument had short-circuited him. Molly's voice sobbed in his ear: "Dan, what're they doing this for? What've we done to them — ?"

A line of beads came out across his eyebrows. "Where are you, quick, where are you?" he said rapidly. But she was already gone. "Not a chance," the first voice said. "Still claim you don't know the answer?"

O'Dare said, "I'm only a cop. What can I do? He's in the hands of the homicide squad —"

"You put him there, you — !" the voice snarled. "You better correct that identification of yours in a hurry. Or maybe you'd like some changes made around the house — a crepe on the door f'rinstance? One hour." The connection broke.

The Inspector, when he'd told him, said: "We'd better get over there in a hurry, see that he's turned out. Can always pick him up again later."

"Not always," thought O'Dare bitterly. The next time Benuto would have a whole battery of legal talent behind him. Danny went running down the stairs after the Inspector, sprinted for the runningboard; they didn't say anything. He was a man before he was a cop, after all.

Benuto was in the basement of a suburban precinct house, where they rarely handled anything more than traffic violations. If they had begun sweating him, he didn't look it; he sat there glowering in a corner. He was, they admitted to the Inspector, a hard nut to crack. They had got nowhere with him.

"His crowd are holding this man's wife," the Inspector said. "Afraid we'll have to pull in our horns for the time being."

"Lemme talk to him," O'Dare pleaded. "Just lemme talk to him alone! Gimme a break."

The Inspector nodded. One of the dicks took the precaution of slipping O'Dare's gun out of its holster first, then they let him go in by himself. He closed the door. The walls were

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thick down in that basement. That was why they brought suspects down there for questioning. They couldn't hear a sound for a while. In about ten minutes O'Dare stuck his disheveled head out and asked for the loan of a fountain pen. One of the dicks passed him his.

"You mean you're getting him to sign?"

"I'm not asking him about the murder," O'Dare said quietly. "Just my wife, now." He went in again. When he came out a second time he was wiping off the gold nib of the pen by pinching it between his fingers. He returned it to the lender. Beyond him, in the murky room, Benuto lay on the floor. Ink discolored his fingernails; there was a purple blob of it underneath each one. It was O'Dare who was doing the shaking, as though it had been pretty much of a strain.

Three pairs of eyes sought his questioningly.

"He told me," he said very low, and wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. "They've got her in a refrigerating plant out at Brierfield. He told them to take her there, in case he was picked up."

"How d'ya know he told you the truth?" one of them asked.

"I let him tell me three times before I paid any attention," O'Dare explained simply. "Three times running it must be the truth; his brain was too busy blowing out fuses to think up a stall, anyway. Gimme back my gun," he wound up somberly, "I'm going there and get her back."

"We'll get her back for you," one of the dicks promised, "now that we know where —"

"I'll do my own getting back." O'Dare's voice rose. "Gimme back my gun. I'm facing suspension anyway, for going off my beat while on duty. Don't try to stop me, any of you; I'm going, with my gun or without it!"

"We're not trying to stop you," the Inspector said. "Give him his gun. Go with him, McKee. The rest of us'll follow. Wait there out of sight for further orders, you two. Don't make a move until we size the place up. This woman's life is at stake."

"And we've got just thirty-five minutes," O'Dare said bitterly.

Brierfield lay across the river. McKee ran the car out along the river drive, with its siren cut off; past the stony cliff-dwellings where Benuto himself lived and had been picked up; past the desolate ash-dumps farther on that were the rewards of demotion on the force. They crossed the interstate bridge, slithered through 4 o'clock, dead-to-the-world, downtown Brierfield, which was just a little annex to the Big Town, and came out in a barren region of scattered breweries, warehouses, and packing plants. The side streets quit but the main highway ran on. McKee slowed a little, doused the lights. They skimmed along like a little mechanical metal beetle. "They coming?" he asked.

O'Dare wasn't interested, didn't even bother to look. "Acme Refriger-

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ating Plant, it's called," he said. "Keep watching. He owns it — one of his stinking rackets."

McKee slowed to a crawl as the outline of a sprawling concrete structure up ahead began topping a rise of the road. A single dreary arc-light shining down on the highway bleached one side of it; the rest was just a black cut-out against the equally black night sky. Stenciled lettering ran the length of the side that faced the road, but too foreshortened by the angle at which they were looking to be decipherable. McKee went over to the side with a neat loop of the wheel, stopped dead — and soundlessly. O'Dare gestured to him, got out, went up ahead to look. "Keep out of that arc-light," McKee whispered.

The cop came back again in a minute. "Sure," he said. "I can make out the first two letters, A and C." He looked back the other way for the first time. "What'd they do, lose their way?"

McKee got out, eased the car door shut after him. O'Dare couldn't stand still, took his gun out, put it away, took it out, put it away. "What time y'got?" he almost whimpered. Not a moving thing showed on the long arc-lit ribbon of road they had just come over.

McKee hadn't been there when the phone call was made to O'Dare. "Five after 4," he answered incautiously.

"Damn them! They'll kill her!" the agonized cop rasped out. He meant the strangely delayed follow-up car. He lurched away, struck out alone toward the ominously quiet building up ahead.

"Hey! Wait!" McKee whispered after him desperately, "Don't do that, you fool!" He took a quick step after him, grabbed him, tried to haul him back to the car. They had a brief, wordless struggle by the roadside, gravel spitting out from under their scuffling shoes. O'Dare, crazed, swung out with all his might at the dick. The blow caught him on the underside of the jaw. McKee went down, sprawling on his back. O'Dare's gun was out again, and he stood there crouched for an instant. "I'm going in there — *now*, d'ya hear me? I'll put a bullet in you if you try to stop me again!" He turned and went toward the concrete hulk, bent double, moving along the roadside with surprising swiftness for a man his weight and height.

Caution, concealment, was a thing of the past. His stumbling footfalls echoed in the stillness of that place like drum-beats. Behind him the road, which he could no longer see, stretched empty all the way back into Brierfield. What was that to him, whether they came now or didn't? In, that was all he wanted — in!

He came up to the cold, rough walls, padded along with one hand outstretched to guide himself. The entrance was around the other side, a darker patch in the dark wall that turned solid as he got up to it. Vast and huge, to admit and disgorge trucks, impregnably barred, the lidded bulb over it screwed off so that it was dark.

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He was like a tormented pygmy-dancing up and down, raging helplessly in front of its huge dimensions. Even McKee didn't come up to help him. Maybe he'd knocked him out.

There weren't any openings at all within reach of the ground. Higher up, at about third-story level, there was a row of embrasures paned with corrugated glass. He ran down the rest of its length, turned a corner to the back, looking desperately for an outside drainpipe — anything that would offer a way up. Nothing broke the smooth surface of the concrete, for the length of half a city block. But there was something else there, a black shape standing out from it. The car in which they'd brought her here, left outside ready for a quick getaway once Benuto was turned loose and they'd got rid of their hostage. O'Dare recognized it. The same hefty Isotta in which Benuto had gone out to do murder earlier that night! They must have dropped him off at his own place, then gone straight to O'Dare's apartment to get her, then come direct out here.

He got up on the car's roof, balanced there erect, saw that even that way he couldn't reach the height of those embrasures. He jumped down again, got in. They had left the key in it, so ready were they to start at hair-trigger timing.

He tuned it up, roared back from the walls in a big semi-circle, careless whether they heard or not. Then he wheeled in toward the plant again, straightened out, came at that door diagonally from away off there in the open, 50 yards away, in high. He slid down the seat, braced his feet. There was a jar that went up his back, exploding in his brain like a blue flash; glass went flying up like powdered sugar from the headlights, and came down again on the rear end of the roof with a sound like rain — but the car ducked in away from it before it was even finished falling. There was electric light inside, rows of dim bulbs that showed an inner wall rushing at him. He was still stunned, but managed to kick his foot down. The car bucked, went into the wall anyway, but with a less severe jolt than the first time. Behind him, the big doorway looked somewhat like those beaded string curtains used in the tropics.

He wanted to stay there, sit there under the front wheel, and just ache. He had a headache and a sprained back and the pit of his stomach felt like a mule had kicked him, and his mouth was gritty with tooth enamel. A disembodied thought, "Molly!" came to him from far away. He didn't know what it meant just then, but he did what it seemed to want him to. He got one of the buckled doors open and crawled out hands first. Just as his chin got to the ground and his feet came clear, a gorgeous sunburst of yellow beamed out from the car engine, and an instant later a towering pillar of flame was shooting from it. It stung him and he jerked away from it sidewise along the floor, but the pain brought him to and he got up on his knees.

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Feet came pounding, but not from the busted front door; from another direction, going toward it. On the opposite side of the curtain of flame. A voice cried shrilly about its hum: "I don't know who was in it, don't bother looking! Get out quick — give it to 'em with the tommy if they try to stop us outside!"

A figure flashed by from behind the furnace-glow and headed for the open door, carrying something in front of it. A second one was right behind it. O'Dare snatched his gun out, did his best to steady his wrist, but couldn't wait to make sure. "Hold it!" he yelled. Both figures whirled. The second one, with a bared revolver, slightly telescoping the first, with a submachine. He fired instantly from where he was, on his knees. It was the second one went down, not the one with the tommy. He'd cleared the way for it, that was all. He dropped flat on his face in a nose-dive, as though there were water under him, not cement flooring.

It was popping, and something that sounded like horizontal rain was hissing by above him. Then it broke off again after about two rounds, and he raised his face from the little pool of blood from the nosebleed he'd given himself. The guy was over his weapon, shaped like a tent, bending too far forward, blocking it from O'Dare with his own body. Then he straightened out in a flat line along the floor, and McKee came in from outside holding a feather of smoke in his fist. He stepped over him.

"Got him, didn't I?" he said almost absent-mindedly. "First time I ever shot a man in the back!" Then taking in O'Dare's blood-filmed face, "Great guns! Shot your puss off —"

"I hit it on the floor ducking!" snapped the cop impatiently. "What was you doing, picking daisies out there the last two hours?"

McKee held the side of his jaw." I took a nap on the road. Next time don't be so —"

The blaze from the car was collapsing into itself, turning red. O'Dare ran around it, past the dick, and into the plant. An arctic blast hit him in the face. There was a long corridor, seeming to stretch for miles, lined on both sides with gleaming white refrigerator doors. Dazzling, like a snow scene, each door big enough to take whole beeves in at a time. He ran down to the far end of it, turned, came back along a second one. "Molly!" he yelled, "Molly!" and then a sudden premonition freezing him, screamed it like an inmate of a madhouse. "Molly!" The sound of his own voice rang mockingly back in the vast, cold, empty place. "They've done away with her! She's in one of these, I know it!"

There was a sudden scampering of footsteps somewhere nearby. He heard McKee, in the next aisle over, stop short, call out, and dart back the other way, as though chasing someone. O'Dare's yells changed as he too raced toward the sound, hidden from him by the towering row of refrigerators. "McKee! Don't shoot him — who-

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ever he is! He's the only one can tell us where she — ! *Don't shoot!*"

And then, in despairing finality, a gun cracked out. Just once.

There was a third prostrate figure this side of the other two when he got there. McKee was standing stock-still, looking down. The Inspector and the rest were coming in from outside.

O'Dare flung himself down on the still form and tried to sit it up.

"He's dead," Danny said, "Whaddya wanta do that for?"

"I didn't do it," McKee said, white, "they got him from outside, like I did the first one."

"She's in one of them ice boxes, I tell ya!" O'Dare screeched, "Now we'll never find out which one —!"

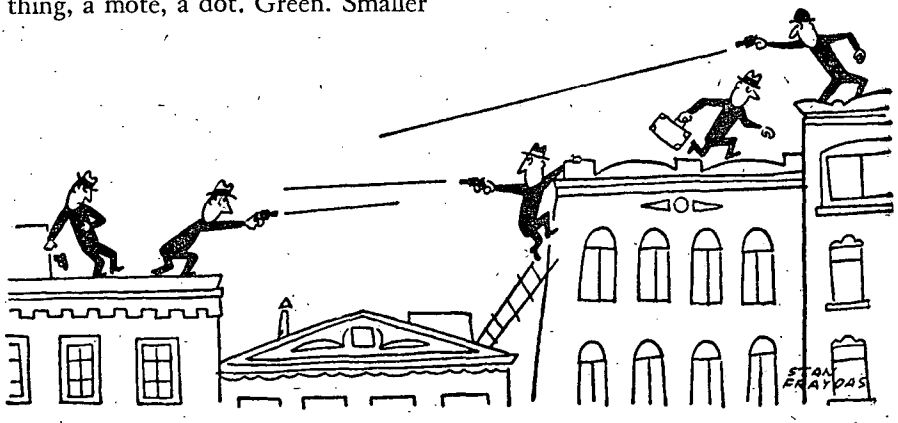
The Inspector barked, "Get in there quick, you men! Open 'em up —"

It was O'Dare who sighted the thing, with seconds that were centuries pounding in his maddened brain. A little fleck of color down the long dazzling white of that vista, a tiny thing, a mote, a dot. Green. Smaller than the smallest new leaf in May. The edge of a dress caught in the air-tight crevice between the ponderous refrigerator door and the refrigerator.

They got it open and she slumped into their arms, lips blue, fingernails broken, in the bright-green dress he'd kidded her so for buying only a week before. (She still has it; he won't let her wear it, but he won't let her give it away either. He touches it to bring him luck, keep them from misfortune, every time he goes out on duty — as a detective, third grade.)

She opened her eyes in the car, going back, and smiled up at the blood-caked face bending over her. "It was so cold in there and dark, and I couldn't breathe any more. It was just a dream wasn't it, Danny? Just a dream and I'm awake now?"

"It was just a dream," Officer 4432 said, holding his wife close in his arms.



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In answer to our public plea Mr. L. J. Beeston has sent EQMM two more of his zestful, fascinating stories. The first is a tale of wild fears and fevered imagination — exactly the kind of tale Mr. Beeston is best at. We invite you to step forward boldly — to embark on a twisting, turning, tortured, tantalizing 'tec trail — as only L. J. Beeston, with his remarkable flair for melodrama, can pluck it out of the "fell clutch of circumstance" . . .

THE HAND IN THE DARK

by L. J. BEESTON

AN AWKWARD THING HAS HAPPENED — a most confoundedly awkward thing!"

The statement was Carling's. He came up out of the sun and dropped onto the bench by Fisher's side, in the cool of the larch that rested green arms on the lawn.

Fisher opened sleepy eyes. "Indeed?" he murmured, politely.

"Yes, sir, indeed. I have been looking for you. I want to tell you about it. But you were sleeping."

"Merely dozing. It is going to be a close, hot day. I hope you do not bring bad news?"

"Infernally bad," grunted Carling. He paused to fill a big pipe made of the root of some strange tree. He had spent 40 years where strange trees are, in the tropical belt. Fisher — a small pale man — winced at the preliminary pungent wave that assailed his nose, menacing his recently swallowed breakfast.

"You were all admiring the diamond which I wore in a ring," started Carling, with incisive brusqueness. "That pale green fellow out of Borneo, of eight grains, and which I could sell for a thousand pounds any day of the week, not excluding Sundays. You remember it?"

"I certainly do."

"Well, it's gone."

"Gone?"

"It was taken from my bedroom last night." Fisher turned sharply, taking hold of the back of the seat as he faced Carling's right profile. The action was followed by a sudden exclamation, and he withdrew his hand to look at the fleshy part of a finger on which a spot of blood had appeared.

"You've got a splinter; suck it out," suggested the other.

"My dear man, this is most serious," exclaimed Fisher, deep concern hushing his voice.

"I agree perfectly; it is. The thing is as simple as it is unpleasant. Before I turned in last night I put the ring in a little porcelain tray on my dressing-table. In the morning it had vanished. Someone had stepped into my

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room and appropriated the pale green. It was no difficult matter. I always sleep with my door and windows wide open. That is only natural to a man whose home has been in the wilds for decades. I allow it was perhaps asking for trouble. I admit carelessness — I should have dropped the ring into a drawer. The same thoughtless habit had made me leave my best razor open and undried — I always shave last thing at night. Be that as it may, somebody has got away with my diamond. First, I thought of a servant. Poor devils, they generally come in for the opening suspicion. The only one who visits my room in the morning is the girl Parry, who fetches the tea. But I was awake when she came; and in any case she couldn't have done it. She hasn't the sort of face."

"No," agreed Fisher, readily. "She has not."

"Who, then? I haven't told our host. I shrink from telling Colonel Houseman. Even to state the facts is to accuse one of his guests. A nasty shock for a man who has entertained us the way he has. All the same I'd be a fool not to take action. Then I thought of you, Fisher. Unlike myself, you have spent all your life in society with the last dazzle of polish on it. You are a man of the world. Seemed to me you might know how to act in such a rotten embarrassment."

Fisher twiddled nervous fingers. His imaginative, tense, sensitive temperament was already flustered.

"I am bound to say that this is my first experience of the kind," he protested. "Really, I wish anything had happened but this. But your course is clear. You must inform Colonel Houseman without delay. It is a duty which you owe to us all. I think that will be apparent to you."

"I suppose so," mused Carling, in the midst of a suffocating cloud of pipe smoke. "Hang it, it will be like hitting him. There are five of us: you and me, Perrill, Arkwright, and Sinjohn. What steps will Houseman take, do you think?"

"If I know him rightly he will insist on your recovering your property. You see, there is an issue at stake even more grave than your heavy loss. I mean the honor of four men. The colonel will carry the thing through in the most unflinching manner."

Carling got up, making a grimace. "Perhaps I'd better keep my tongue between my teeth," he growled.

"It is too late."

"What do you mean — too late?"

"You have told me, and now we must all be told."

Carling stared, then shrugged his shoulders. "I follow you," he grunted. "Of course."

Left alone Fisher pressed a hand to his forehead, which ached. It was a distressing affair, and he already felt it acutely. Either Perrill, Arkwright, or Sinjohn had stolen the jewel. It was only the day before yesterday that Carling had taken it off his finger and passed it round for inspection.

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Everyone had admired the precious stone, just kissed with a faint aquamarine tint. And was it possible that even then one of them had regarded it with the eye of a thief? Fisher shuddered at the repellent suggestion.

His head throbbed. There was a weariness in his bones with a slight touch of feverishness. He decided to go indoors and rest in his cool room for an hour. He was not unaccustomed to this migraine, and he always kept by him a little medicated snuff which had been prescribed for the purpose.

On opening a drawer in his dressing-table he perceived that the little box containing the snuff was not there. Strange! True, he had not used it since arriving on this visit to the country; but he had a most distinct recollection of removing it from a pocket in his large leather dressing-case and placing it in the dressing-table drawer. A most distinct recollection.

For a minute or so he stood frowning and puzzled. It seemed a waste of time to look in the dressing-case, but he unfastened the nickel clasps and —

Suddenly he saw the box. It was inside the case. A simple little round box of cedarwood with a screw top. Still frowning, he took it out, and then he saw, smeared across the top of it, a dull, reddish-brown stain which looked like dried blood.

Between Fisher's eyes the furrowed perplexity deepened. He stared at the box in a most intent fashion. Suddenly a wave of crimson burned his face. His first act was to shake the box gently. Then he put it back inside the dressing-case and sank into a chair.

He had been stabbed by an idea, and it had hurt him pretty severely. He became just as white as he had been red, and the sweat of it broke upon his forehead. Involuntarily he glanced at the trifling injury to his finger.

It had not been caused by a splinter from the back of the bench in the garden. Fisher knew that perfectly well. He had found a slight cut there when he was dressing, and had wondered at it for a fraction of a second.

And he had wondered also at his great weariness, his overpowering sleepiness, for he had not spent a wakeful night.

A horrible explanation of both mysteries now flashed upon him. There were occasions in his life when he had walked in his sleep, when he had acted with his senses still drugged by slumber. On each of these occasions he had been in a strange house. And now there rushed upon him the question, "Is it possible that I entered Carling's room last night, took the diamond from his table, concealed it in my snuff-box, and put it away in my dressing-case? Good God! is it possible that I did this insane thing?"

The cut in his finger might well have been caused by contact with the open razor which Carling had left on his table. In groping for the ring he — Fisher — had touched the edge of the blade. His finger had bled and so had stained the box, which he had made use of as a place of concealment. Yes,

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it *must* be so. In what other way could he explain the facts? There was the snuff-box put away; there was the blood upon it.

Damning!

But in the first shock of suspicion he had shaken the box. Would he not have heard the ring rattle if it had been inside? Not necessarily. It might have sunk into the snuff, might be embedded there.

But he had only to open the snuff-box in order to ease, in one way, the crisis of the situation. He told himself this, but it was just what he felt himself unable to do — at any rate, for the moment. At the present moment it was not *certain* that he had committed this horrible — if unwitting — crime. He might be entirely innocent of it. That was something.

At the best of times he was just a bundle of nerves, and now they were lacerated nerves. A gentleman to his fingertips, Fisher had no enemies except a morbid sensitiveness, an abnormal timidity. His racked thoughts rapidly scanned the situation. Carling had come to him with his story of having been robbed of a very valuable jewel. If he — Fisher — was to go to him immediately afterwards, saying, "Here is your diamond. I took it during sleep, and now have luckily discovered that I did so," what would Carling think? What would the others think — since by this time Colonel Houseman had been told of the story? Would they unhesitatingly acquit him of the crime? The colonel would. Fisher realized that. But the rest? Before his face they might be silent; they might even proffer sympathy. But later on, at their clubs, in their homes? And Carling himself — that large, strong man, who did not know what nerves were and rather despised them in his fellows — what construction would he put on the affair?

Fisher kept wiping his forehead, and the perspiration kept instantly gathering again. Imagination groped in a far future. He would meet friends in the street, but they would not meet *him*. He knew the subtlety of that distinction. In his club he saw the evening papers go up before faces as he entered. He heard a compelled "Ah, Fisher, I didn't see you!" and felt the chill of a listless palm in his. Horrible! He had seen all that sort of thing done on others. He could imagine nothing worse happening to him.

With an effort he pushed his nightmare off his chest. He tried to convince himself that he was, perhaps, sweating under a ghastly illusion. There was a chance that this worry was without a cause, and that the missing jewel was not where he suspected it to be. He hugged this thought for all it was worth. It was a tenuous hope, but he dared not risk shattering it by looking. If he saw the ring there he would faint. At present, at any rate, he could not screw up his courage for the ordeal; he could not risk blowing out a glimmer of hope. . .

Colonel Houseman grappled with the affair with the straight common sense and directness of an old soldier.

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It was after dinner when he threw his bomb and blew his guests' equanimity to remnants.

"No man here is going to be annoyed with me or Carling," said he, going round coolly with the cigars. "No man is going to be foolishly offended. It is an ugly affair, but it can only hurt a single person. I must deal with it; we must deal with it, and then we'll forget it everlastingly. Carling is absolutely sure that he placed his diamond on his dressing-table when he went to bed last night. Since he told me of it I have had the room searched in a manner that would not have left a hair undiscovered. Parry was the only servant who entered, or who was near his room. I have seen her. She is a sensible, right-headed woman, and she has been in my service for ten years. Unhesitatingly she made an exhaustive examination of all her belongings in my presence. What she so readily and cheerfully did any gentleman will do in the circs. That is admitted?"

"Certainly it is," Perrill was the first to answer. "Our sympathies are with you, Houseman. I am entirely at your disposal in the matter."

"The right thing, to which I fully subscribe," said Arkwright.

The colonel's eye traveled to Sinjohn.

"Of course, of course," said the latter, unaffectedly.

Fisher felt the eye upon him.

"I am in complete agreement with the suggestion," he said, feeling the soles of his feet go chill.

"Oh, hang it all!" burst in Carling, who was by far the most uncomfortable of all. "I beg that the matter may be allowed to slide. I was a fool to intrude my loss —"

"You would have been a worse fool not to have spoken of it," smiled Colonel Houseman, genially. "Don't take it to heart, old man. None of us is going to. Nettles must be grasped, and we'll grasp this one. We ought to straighten it out between ourselves, and we will."

"But I don't like this searching business," stammered Carling, wriggling in his chair. "There's a neater method. If any living soul in this house so far forgot himself as to — er — er — to borrow my diamond for a few hours, then let him come to me privately, say so, and return it. That'll be the end of it. I think I know how to keep my mouth shut."

"Better than your bedroom door," grinned the colonel, determined not to exclude a healthy good-humor. "Fair and charitable. Carling; but in the circumstances rather rough on anyone else under my roof, do you not think? I should insist on your whispering a name to me, you know. That would close the affair, certainly."

Fisher writhed. He foresaw the sequel to this scheme. Houseman would, in turn, whisper the name to the others, who would have a right to know it. They also would speak of closed mouths, of keeping the thing in a proper and polite dark. And then, later on, after a week or so, the cooling of friendships, the cessation of in-

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vitations, the side-glances of wonder and disdain.

"Anyhow," Carling insisted, vehemently, "I ask the favor that you will leave it that way until, say, the morning."

"Personally I am willing," answered Houseman, with a look round.

There was no dissent, and the acutely painful subject was turned aside. But it showed itself in the changed tones of the speakers, in laughter that did not ring true, in the long, uncomfortable pauses. Colonel Houseman, who seemed most at his ease, was in the grip of mental pincers. What a horrible thing to happen in a man's house! He had known it to occur in other men's houses once or twice. On one occasion it had been hushed up; on another the loser had made a most infernal noise, and the scandal had gone right through the clubs.

"That was a detective's doing," reflected the colonel, gloomily reminiscent. "A plainclothes police-officer was employed. Now, I would sooner poison my guests than have them put under surveillance."

Fisher's wearied brain was lashed by a single thought. *Was the diamond ring in his snuff-box, or wasn't it?* That he had deferred action very fatally was now palpable. If it was too late after Carling's confidence in him alone, it was doubly too late since Colonel Houseman had spoken. He saw himself trying to explain before them all. How he would falter and stutter, and look the typical liar from his perspiring forehead to his shuffling feet!

For an hour or two he watched the others knock billiard balls about; and then he tried to write a letter; and then he said good night and sought his own room.

He switched on the light and stared steadfastly at his dressing-case in a corner. *Was the ring inside there, or wasn't it?*

Suddenly he got an idea. Why not take his box of medicated snuff and bury it in some corner outside? Bury it without opening it! It was now by no means an absolute certainty that he had taken the jewel and hidden it, and there was no reason why he ever should be certain. If he looked into the receptacle and found the diamond there, then he could not possibly bury it. That would be monstrous, and and highly dangerous to himself. He would never know a moment's future peace. But the case would be different if he got rid of the box while in ignorance of what was inside it.

He pulled up his blind and softly raised the window. A roar of rain boomed up from the ground and the dripping laurels. That meant that he would get wet. His clothes might dry in the night. On the other hand, they might not. In the latter case his nocturnal exodus might be suspected. Ugly very.

He peered down. He would not have to drop far, but he was bound to create some noise. A light filtered through the blinds of the billiard room below, and he heard Perrill's

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voice call out, "That was a God-help-me sort of stroke, Arkwright."

No, he would not put such an idea into action. It had a soiled appearance, anyhow; and if he was found at it — goodbye to all life worth living. He pulled down the window and sank into a chair, breathing hard.

"I'll try no hole-and-corner way out of it," muttered Fisher. "In the morning my belongings will be raked over. The chances are about forty-nine in fifty that Carling's accursed diamond is in my snuff-box. The affair having gone so far, it will be better that others find it there, not I. Yes, that may help me a little. I shall then be able to express astonishment; to affirm, with perfect truth, that I did not know it was there."

This was undeniable, but it brought small comfort. He fixed his eyes upon the dressing-case, brooding and dejected. He heard sounds below of bolts being pushed into sockets. Every one was retiring. They would all pass a good night except himself.

"And yet, is that certain?" he reflected. "There is just a chance that Perrill, or Arkwright, or Sinjohn took the jewel. Still, they are men of means, and it seems incredible that either should stoop to such degradation. Unfortunately, I am not so happily situated in that respect, and that will go against me if — if —"

So his imagination wandered off into this turning and that, groping after wild clues, after impossible elucidations. A deep silence reigned in the house, broken at regular intervals by the drone of a big clock sounding the half-hours.

Suddenly Fisher opened his eyes. He had dozed in his big, cushion-padded chair without knowing it. His limbs were cramped, almost numb, and he felt chilly. The artificial light still glowed in his room, but it was rendered pale and sickly by being mingled with the breaking dawn. Fisher stared about him rather foolishly, hardly realizing where he was. Then it all came back to him, and he relaxed with a heavy sigh.

He heaved himself up from his chair and drew aside the curtains. The rain was over, and the sky was striated with gray dawn changing rapidly to gold. He looked at his watch. He had slept three hours in his chair. It had been about 2 o'clock when he dropped off, and it was now 5. Catching a glimpse of himself in a mirror, he started to see how pale he was, how wretchedly unshaven he looked.

At that moment he heard a murmur of voices down the corridor. In a dull and almost involuntary fashion he opened his door to listen. Colonel Houseman was up and speaking.

"You're an early riser, Carling," he was saying. "Going to find our breakfast in the river? If you'll wait five minutes I'll get my rod and join you. I agree —"

"Right-o, Colonel," interrupted Carling, loudly and cheerily. "And I've got some good news for you. What do you think? I have found my diamond."

There was a gasp of astonishment

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from Houseman. "*Found* it?" he echoed. "Where?"

"On the china tray on my dressing-table! It was replaced during the night. That is about the best thing —"

Fisher moved back. He closed his door softly. A mountain's weight rolled off his chest, and yet for all that he felt himself suffocating, choking in a relief which was almost an agony. What? He had been entirely innocent after all? He had suffered himself foolishly to endure those hours of torture when not the slightest necessity had existed?

He leaped towards his dressing-case to snatch from it the cause of all that misery.

The snuff-box was not there.

For a moment he stood as if paralyzed by this fresh shock. Dazed, well-nigh stupefied, he plunged his hands into his trouser pockets in an attitude of amazed contemplation. Suddenly his lips parted; his eyes commenced to protrude. Slowly he withdrew his right hand. He stared at it as if it contained something entirely new to the universe.

It was his round box of medicated snuff. He gasped, in a loud, hoarse whisper:

"I — I put it back myself!"

He took a staggering step or two to his bed and dropped upon the side of it. He was almost fainting with relief. Staring at the box in his hand he considered. His lips formed certain words without giving them direct utterance. If he had spoken them aloud, this is what he would have said:

"Confess? Own up? Explain? I think not! For just as I was not sure that I took the diamond, *so I am not certain that I restored it!*"

It was perfectly sound logic.

Hospitalized Veterans' Story Contest

Each year "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine" gives its hospitalized veteran readers a chance to become writers and win awards totaling up to $50. Through the 8th Annual Contest of the Hospitalized Veterans Writing Project, EQMM is awarding a $25 first prize, plus a $15 second prize, and a $10 third prize, for the best crime, mystery, or detective stories submitted. Veterans may get full rules by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Project, 1120 Lake Shore Dr., Chicago 11, Illinois, or by addressing the Project at the Empire State Bldg., N. Y. C. But hurry—contest closes April 15, 1955.

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One of the cleverest short-shorts we have ever read

THE CRIME BY THE RIVER

by EDMUND CRISPIN

NO, THE HOUSEKEEPER SAID, SHE was sorry, but the Chief Constable still wasn't back from London. He ought to be arriving any time now, though, so if the Superintendent would care to wait. . . . The Superintendent said that he would wait in the garden.

But it was the farmhouse across the river, rather than the gentle air of the October evening, which made him decide to stay out of doors.

At first he was resolute in ignoring its summons. Then, as time wore on, his determination weakened. And presently (as in his heart of hearts he had known must happen in the end) he found himself crossing the leaf-strewn front lawn, found himself halted by the bedraggled hedge at the far side and staring over the stream at the out-building where Elsie the servant-girl had kept her last assignation. . . . Death by strangling.

Across the river, a figure, unidentifiable in the failing light, emerged from the stables, then trudged through the yard. It was Wregson, obviously: Wregson the retired Indian Civil Servant, Wregson the tenant of the farmhouse, Wregson the widower, Wregson the pathetic, Wregson the bore; Wregson who had no doubt been fussing in the stables over the horse he had bought that morning. . . .

Glumly the Superintendent watched him until he disappeared from view. In a few weeks' time the Superintendent, too, would be retiring.

I'll be glad to be done with it, he said to himself now; *my God, yes, I'll be glad to get away from it all.*

The sound of a car roused him, and he returned to the house. "Here we are, sir," he said with a cheerfulness he was far from feeling, as he helped the Chief Constable out of the driver's seat. "Conference go off all right?"

"Hello, Tom." The Chief Constable was thin and old, and his complexion looked bleached. "The conference? Oh, the usual thing, you know: too many speeches and too few resolutions. Ruddy awful hotel, too."

"What time did you leave Town?"

"Two o'clock."

"Well, that's not bad going. . . . I've had a packet this afternoon, sir. Do you want a bath or a meal or something first, or shall I —"

"No, I'd rather stretch my legs. Let's stroll down to the river."

At first they walked in silence — the companionable silence of men who have worked together amicably

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for many years. Then, as they came in sight of the farmhouse on the opposite bank, the Superintendent nodded towards it and spoke.

"That's where it happened, sir — almost on your own doorstep, really. It's the servant-girl, Elsie. Throttled in an out-building some time this afternoon."

The Chief Constable took his time about assimilating this. Presently he nodded. "Yes, I've only visited Wregson twice," he said. "Mostly it's been the other way about. But I think I remember seeing the girl."

"I daresay she was striking enough." But the Superintendent spoke from inference only: it was a stiff and staring thing, a purple-tongued horror, that he had actually seen. "It wasn't a premeditated job, sir, as far as I can make out. Just someone in a sudden passion. And I had it from Dr. Hands that the girl came to him a couple of weeks ago for a pregnancy test: result positive. You can see what that points to."

"Yes." The Chief Constable's head was hunched down between his shoulders as he stared in front of him into the gathering dusk. "A very well-worn track, that one. . . . Has Wregson still got his nephew staying with him?"

"Yes, he's still there." A flabby, fluttering young man, the Superintendent had thought, like the furry, overblown kind of moth. "He and Wregson are the prime suspects, obviously." For a moment his voice trailed away; then, with something of an effort: "Seeing that they were neighbors of yours, sir, I didn't —"

"My dear chap, they may be neighbors, but they certainly aren't friends. No, you mustn't let that worry you. But of course, I'm interested to know how things stand."

"Well, sir," said the Superintendent, perceptibly relieved, "briefly, it's like this. Dr. Hands says the thing happened between 1 and 3 P.M., approximately. The body was found by Wregson at about 5. They'd had an early lunch, which the girl served, and after that neither of the men set eyes on her — so they say. From lunch onwards the nephew says he was alone in his room, working. About 2 o'clock Wregson rode over here to look you up, hoping you'd be back —"

"So he's bought himself a horse at last, has he? He's been talking about it for long enough. . . . Yes, sorry, Tom. Go on."

"Well, he didn't find you, of course, so he rode back again and arrived home about a quarter to 3. From then on he didn't see the nephew, and the nephew didn't see him — so they say."

The Chief Constable took his time about this, too. It was a trait, the Superintendent reflected, which had been increasingly in evidence since his wife's sudden and tragic death two years before. And God knows, living alone in this great barn of a house with no one but an aging servant for company —

But by the time the Superintend-

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ent reached this stage in his meditations, the Chief Constable was functioning again. "Any fingerprints?" he asked.

"Only Wregson's and the girl's and the nephew's so far — what you'd expect. But then, if it was an outsider who did it, he wouldn't have needed to leave any prints. All he'd have to do, if the girl was waiting for him in the out-building, would be to go through an open gate and an open door, and there he'd be. As to footmarks — well, the ground's as hard as brass."

They had reached the river bank and were standing beside a tree half of whose roots had been laid bare by the water's steady erosion. Midges hovered above their heads. On the far bank, the dinghy in which Wregson had been accustomed to scull himself across on his visits to the Chief Constable bumped lazily against its mooring post, and in the kitchen window of the farmhouse a light went on. . . .

"Not an easy one, no," the Chief Constable was saying. "You'll be finding out about Elsie's boy friends, of course, and I suppose that until you've done that you won't be wanting to commit yourself."

He looked up sharply when there was no reply, and saw that the Superintendent was staring out over the water with eyes that had gone suddenly blank. "Tom! I was saying that I imagined. . . ."

But it was a long while before he was answered. And when at last the answer came, it was in the voice of a stranger.

"But you're wrong, sir," said the Superintendent dully. "I know who did it, all right."

Fractionally he hesitated; then: "I tell you frankly," he went on with more vigor, "that I haven't got anything that would stand up in court. It's like the Rogers case, as far as that goes. . . . It's like the Rogers case in more ways than one."

The Chief Constable nodded. "I remember. . . ."

EDITORS' NOTE: *By this time you have probably guessed the identity of the strangler. But in this story the identity of the murderer is not the measure of the author's ingenuity. The significant question is:* How *does the Superintendent know who killed the servant girl? What is the all-revealing clue which the author has given you with complete fairness? We warn you, it is not a simple clue to spot. It is one of the cleverest, one of the subtlest clues we have come upon in a long time. Indeed, the solution of a full-length detective novel could easily have hinged on this single point.*

Presently the Chief Constable stirred, saying:

"Yes, I'm glad it's over. I don't know that I ever seriously intended to try and bluff it out, but living's a habit you don't break yourself of very easily, and — Well, never mind all that." He was trying hard to speak lightly. "By the way, Tom, what did

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I do — leave my driver's license lying on the scene of the crime?"

The Superintendent spoke carefully: "When I told you that Wregson came over to look you up at 2 o'clock, you assumed I said *r-o-d-e* — as, in fact, I did — when you ought to have assumed I was saying *r-o-w-e-d*."

The Chief Constable considered. "Yes. Yes, I see. If I'd really left town at lunch-time, I shouldn't have known anything about Wregson's buying a horse. And without a horse he would have sculled across the river — *r-o-w-e-d* — as he always did before. Well, well. Tom, I'm not at all sure what the drill is in a situation like this, but I should imagine you'd better get into direct touch with the Home Office."

"There's no case against anyone else, sir." The Superintendent's voice was deliberately expressionless.

"Thanks very much, but no. Now that Vera's dead —"

He grimaced suddenly. "However, I'm too much of a coward to want to hang about waiting for the due processes of law. So, Tom, if you don't mind. . . ."

A mile and a half beyond the house the Superintendent stopped his car in order to light a cigarette. But he never looked back. And even in Wregson's farmhouse, where they were starting their makeshift evening meal, no one heard the shot, no one marked, across the dark stream, the new anonymous shadow under the willow tree.

NEXT MONTH . . .

Six prize-winning stories — including those by:

Stuart Palmer and Craig Rice
Eleazar Lipsky
Anthony Boucher
Hugh B. Cave

Six other fine stories of crime and detection — including those by:

Margery Allingham
Roald Dahl
Arnold Bennett
Nick Carter

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Jan Thompson's "The Mirror of the Man" is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Ninth Annual Contest . . . One morning in May 1953 we received a manuscript with a brief handwritten note attached which asked: "Would you be interested in a detective story whose solution is reached through handwriting analysis?" We read the manuscript and promptly informed the author, Miss Thompson, that we were definitely interested, and proved our interest by purchasing her story. (And from that moment to this we have wondered that Miss Thompson made the inquiry in her own handwriting: what if we *were able to analyze handwriting?)*

The editorial staff of EQMM shared our pleasure in Miss Thompson's first story. Typical comments were: "gem-like," "compact," and "very satisfying." We hope you will agree.

The author has taught English for a number of years in the public schools of Chicago — "and if you think," wrote Miss Thompson, "that is either peaceful or removed from life, you are mistaken." As a schoolteacher, she has been, in her own words, "severely trained on the classics." But she also hastened to say, to quote her own words again, that "it seems I have always read detective stories." Brava, Miss Thompson!

She became interested in character analysis through handwriting because she sincerely believes that "people are the most stubborn mysteries of all. I began to read my friends' handwriting for fun and was amazed to find how often my diagnosis was true." But she was forced to give it up for a time: the hobby threatened to become an obsession — and that can be dangerous, entirely apart from the possibility of losing one's friends . . .

THE MIRROR OF THE MAN

by JAN THOMPSON

HE LOOKED LIKE THE TYPE OF grandfather you would be glad to have in the family, but his dinner date was not on time and though the Martini was good, he frowned a little. But as soon as he saw the natty young man coming toward his table, he stood up and smiled. "Mr. George Webb, I believe?"

They shook hands, sat down. They

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ordered roast beef, potatoes, string beans, and two more Martinis. Then they said nothing for a while.

"I'm Larrimore, of course," said the older man. "Miranda's brother. Forgive me, I'm a bug on the subject of ties. That's a Duchess, isn't it?"

The waiter set the Martinis down.

"Me wearing a Duchess?" the young man said. "That's more your speed, Mr. Larrimore. One Duchess tie and I'd starve for a week."

"My error," said Larrimore, and he sampled the drink.

"Miranda speaks of you often," said Webb. "Has she mentioned me?"

Larrimore sighed. His smile disappeared. "She's my only sister, but we don't see as much of each other as we should. I live in the country and Miranda has always preferred the town. There are twelve and a half years between us, Mr. Webb. That makes a difference in viewpoints, I think."

"Naturally," said Webb.

The salad arrived.

Webb said, "I'm sorry if I answered sharply just now, but I don't understand —"

"How could you?" said Larrimore, smiling again. "A man you've never met sends you a command — no, I insist it *was* actually a command — to meet him for dinner at the Omar Restaurant. It was good of you to come."

"I thought it might be about Miranda," said Webb.

"Do you like your roast beef rare, Mr. Webb?" said the other.

"I know it's about Miranda," Webb persisted. "Why do you go on torturing me?"

"Torturing you, Mr. Webb?"

Webb ran nervous fingers through his hair. "I know it sounds silly — me being so much younger — young enough, you might say, to be her son — but I love Miranda."

"I judge," said Larrimore, "that she doesn't reciprocate the feeling."

Webb set his jaws and shook his head violently.

"Eat your potatoes anyhow. There's nothing worse in life than cold potatoes *au gratin*."

Webb said, "We saw a good deal of each other for a while. And she was very kind to me."

"She's always kind. You haven't been seeing her, then, the past few weeks?"

"No," said Webb. "At her request."

Larrimore sighed again. "Then I doubt if you can help."

"What's happened to her?"

Larrimore said, "A hot biscuit, Mr. Webb? You know Stella, my niece?"

Webb said he did.

"She's sure Miranda is being blackmailed."

"But why? She hasn't done anything wrong."

"Mr. Webb," said Larrimore with sudden severity, "you must realize that simply cannot be true. The generous and unguarded are made to be blackmailed. The plane crash in which her husband was killed was a very great shock. She was a devoted

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woman, Mr. Webb, and if I tell you that she was devoted to her husband, I hope it will not disillusion you."

"No, indeed," the young man said.

"Stella ran across Miranda's account book. There are payments of more than two thousand dollars in the past two weeks alone. To a certain Mr. X."

Webb whistled. "He might just be a needy genius. You know Miranda's interest in the arts."

"I know my sister's habits," said Larrimore. "She is an honest patroness of the arts. But whenever she gave in the past, she gave openly. She always advertises whatever she believes in. We differ there too. And a mind does not change its habits, Mr. Webb."

"No one knows about Mr. X?"

"No one. Stella asked, 'What's this man selling you?' And Miranda said, 'Mud. Keep out of it.' Add to that the fact she's drinking and smoking far too much. And add further that she has been talking of suicide."

"No," said Webb, considering it. "That's not Miranda."

"Obviously," said Larrimore.

Webb sprang to his feet. "I'll go to her now. I'll get his name if I have to argue with her all night. And then I'll beat the scoundrel to death."

Larrimore was standing too. "But you haven't had your food. Sit down, Mr. Webb. There's no hurry about this. I have come to take care of this little matter without troubling my sister about it at all."

The young man sat down. "Then you have a clue?"

The waiter was back. Larrimore said, "What will you have for dessert, Mr. Webb? The Strawberries Romanoff are excellent."

"Oh, Strawberries Romanoff, by all means," said Webb. "Do you know who Mr. X is?"

Larrimore slid a hand inside his coat and pulled out a few sheets of crumpled paper. "Stella is a very observant girl. She noted that Miranda always became most difficult just after reading the morning mail. She concluded from this that the blackmailer gets in touch with Miranda by writing."

"That sounds possible," said Webb.

"So I directed Stella to rifle Miranda's wastebaskets. For some time now she has been sending their contents to me."

"Interesting," said Webb. "But would the blackmailer be so foolish as to put his demands in writing?"

"Of course the blackmailer would be careful how he phrases them. Now, yesterday afternoon Miranda drew out one thousand dollars and paid it to someone. We have here three letters making appointments, the only three letters she received in yesterday morning's mail."

Webb was troubled. "Wouldn't it be simpler to employ a detective and have Miranda followed? If I had your means, Mr. Larrimore, that's what I'd have done."

Larrimore was aghast. "Have my own sister followed, Mr. Webb? How — how uncouth!"

"Perhaps you're right," said Webb,

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his eyes on the letters. "Who are they from?"

Larrimore smoothed the first one against the tablecloth. It was about the size of a typewriting sheet, with only six lines, including the salutation and signature, all so enormous that they were cramped for space. They would have been legible at a distance of six feet. The message read:

Randy dear,

The Ceres paid off! Big celebration. Tonight. My place.

See you,

Phil

"Philip Boccarini, the sculptor," said Webb.

"Oh. What sort of man would you say he is?"

"An egoist," Webb answered. "Thinks only of himself. Never makes a statue weighing less than a ton. Never talks about anybody but himself, never thinks about anybody but himself."

"Good," said Larrimore. "That's just the sort of thing I was hoping for. Now, one essential qualification for any blackmailer is a certain cruelty."

"Well," said Webb, "all I know is if Boccarini wants anything, nobody on earth can stand in his way."

Larrimore moved the first letter over to the left. "He's candidate Number One."

"Why, this is fun," said Webb. "I'm beginning to feel like Dr. Watson himself."

"Thank you very much," said Larrimore. "But you're forgetting the Strawberries Romanoff. You will notice I have not neglected them myself. Now, Exhibit Number Two."

It was a stiff sheet of paper that had never been meant for a pen. As a matter of fact, it was the flyleaf torn out of a book. The handwriting was almost illegible, for the individual letters were excessively narrow and excessively tall, and all crowded together. The pressure was tremulous and delicate. The thin, long loops on *h*'s and *g*'s reached far above and below the line, thus tangling with other words.

Larrimore read the message:

Dear Miranda,

I find I am an invalid again, and the cupboard is bare. I wonder sometimes why I bother to go on. Can you spare a minute this afternoon?

In deepest humiliation,

Stewart

"Randall Stewart, poor devil," Webb said at once. "A painter. Have you seen his work?"

Larrimore said he had not.

"Talk about Poe," Webb said with some distaste. "You can see that his subjects are meant to be people, but they seem to be down at the bottom of a pit. I always wondered if he took drugs. Of course, he never sells anything."

"Would he go as far as blackmail, do you think?"

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Webb considered, then shook his head doubtfully. "How can you tell what goes on in his mind? He has no friends. He suspects them all and quarrels with them all. If Miranda wasn't a saint herself, she couldn't put up with his crazy scenes."

"Morbid. Unstable," Larrimore said. "Candidate Number Two." He placed the letter over the first.

Webb's face was very serious now. "The third, of course, is mine."

It was only a scrap of paper, three by four inches in size. Its script, however, was so small, upright, and neat that it gave the appearance of having been printed. Nothing enmeshed, the lines were set wide, each letter, each word standing perfectly clear, and all with a remarkable minimum of stroke. The words were:

Darling,

The park bench Friday at 2. The same park bench where first we met. Rain or shine, I'll be waiting. You are my sun.

Hopefully,

George

"I was in a state," said Webb, running his fingers through his hair again. "I had to write. I couldn't find paper, so I tore a piece off another letter I had."

Larrimore made a sympathetic murmur. "Sad. Did she come?"

Webb was forlorn. "I waited two hours. In the rain too."

"The power of love," said Larrimore, and drained his coffee cup. There was something final about his manner.

Webb said timidly, "Did I help at all?"

"Why, we have the man conclusively, Mr. Webb."

"Which one?" Webb asked, leaning across the table.

Larrimore took a long breath and expelled it in a sigh of pure content. "Be patient, Mr. Webb. I must build up to that. You see, one of my hobbies is the study and analysis of handwriting."

"Handwriting?" said Webb. "You mean, character from handwriting?"

"The mirror of the man," said the other.

Webb almost scoffed. "Fortune telling," he said. "You made me feel like Watson, but now I feel like a fool."

"Watson was no fool," said Larrimore. "Let us eliminate. First, Mr. Boccarini." They looked at the first letter again.

"Each line," said Larrimore, "more than three ordinary handwritings high. Look at the dash, the pride in himself. An enormous hand, enormous statues, probably enormous parties, and enormous noise. He considers himself a Titan. Now what is the first need of such a man?"

"Opportunity?" ventured Webb.

"No, an audience, Mr. Webb. Every letter on this page says, 'Look at me. Here I am. Boccarini speaking.' But blackmail is a low, small, and secret thing. No one must know or the blackmailer is ruined. Mr. Boc-

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carini could lead a revolution. Single-handed he could attack ten men in an open street. But if he had no audience, he would put on no show." Larrimore wadded up the paper and threw it aside.

"Now, let us consider Stewart."

Larrimore smoothed the resistant flyleaf. "A sick man — transparently. In body and in mind. Probably in body because of mind. A delicate man, plagued with fears of his own imagining. A prey to every small misfortune in life. Nervous, highly strung, uncertain about others, uncertain about himself. Could such a man succeed as a blackmailer?"

"For revenge on the world," said Webb, moistening his lips.

Larrimore raised his eyebrows. "Why, to him every movement is a danger in itself. Could he sustain any situation of real danger? Could he go on day after day terrorizing someone else? No, Mr. Webb. His mind could not stand it. The patience, the drive, the quiet diabolical persistence are nowhere in him."

"Then that leaves — me."

"You, Mr. Webb." Larrimore pushed over the scrap of paper to where Webb could see it, but Webb did not look. "Here we have calm, quiet, mathematical precision, which does not jibe at all with the message itself. Every detail — every *i* dotted, every *t* crossed — everything carefully in place. Here is a cold, small, emotionless nature. The vowels are tight-locked and double-locked as though the writer never says a word without first carefully estimating its effect. Note how the spacing is calculated — as though he knew exactly what he was about to say before he even put pen to paper. And nothing — no interfering thought, no qualm, no pity — could swerve him from his purpose, once he had begun."

"You flatter me."

"No, I think not. You are not a generous person, Mr. Webb. In fact, you are just as parsimonious with ink as you are with paper."

Webb said, "I didn't take the note seriously. I just dashed it off."

"Indeed you did not! You tore it from a larger sheet *with a ruler* — the marks of tearing along a metal edge are plainly visible. You wouldn't waste even a full sheet of paper on Miranda. Even for a thousand dollars, you wouldn't waste a whole sheet."

Webb crossed his legs. Gone altogether were his schoolboy air and the faint melancholy. A brassy defiance was in their place. "I am interested in what you are planning to do," he said.

"I knew it must be you over a week ago. With a magnifying glass I saw the slight break at the bottom of the *a*'s — the only sign of dishonesty I detected in any of the letters. It was very simple. I did employ detectives, as you suggested, and they backtracked you."

Webb was listening now with a poker face.

"In Cleveland, Mr. Webb, there is a man named Miropoulos, a restaurant owner. He and the police would very

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much like to know what became of a cashier known as George E. Webster. After patiently embezzling some seven hundred dollars, Mr. Webster vanished."

They looked at each other across the table, almost as if it were for the first time.

"An even exchange, Mr. Larrimore?" said Webb.

"An even exchange."

Larrimore collected the three sheets of paper, lifted the glass which had contained the dessert, and burned them in the plate.

"You old hypocrite," said Webb when they were ashes. "You knew all the time. Why didn't you say so at once?"

"Because I don't often get to the theatre these days. And I wanted to observe you as the romantic lover."

"Was I so bad?"

"Frankly, Mr. Webb, you were atrocious. But in a style all your own. I'll never see anything quite like it again. By the way, next time you write in a sentimental vein, revise the form of all your *g*'s. They look too much like the number 9 and that suggests the financial note."

"Anything else?" said Webb.

"Rewrite the whole letter when you make a mistake."

"Mistake?" said Webb, incredulous. "I made no mistake. I thought about it an hour before I began to write."

"The mistake showed up under a magnifying glass. Still I enjoyed it very much, it was so typical." And here Larrimore laughed so hard that for a few moments he could not go on.

"May I ask what it was?"

"The word *sun*, Mr. Webb. In the line, *You are my sun.* It was the only spot you had to correct. You first wrote *sum.*

Webb laughed a little too.

Larrimore said, "Will you answer one question?"

"There's something you *don't* know?"

"That tie. It *is* a Duchess, isn't it? Thank you. I was sure. And now," said Larrimore, "our business is over. Let me thank you for a delicious meal."

With a sudden burst of speed Larrimore got up and went out. After a while Webb noticed the unpaid check near his plate.

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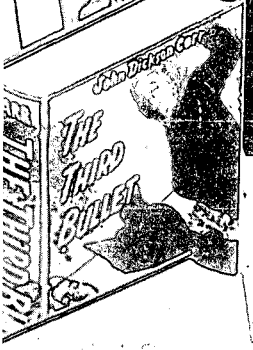

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